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NURSE WITH WINGS
Original Title: Flight Nurse
Her training left no room for romance, until she learned that she was a woman first and a nurse second
Georgia Craig
4610

It was to be the first wedding at the hospital base, and everyone—from the commanding General to the amputees waiting for transport home—felt the excitement and tried, in some small way, to contribute something to the party.

The sugar rations had been pooled for a cake, baked with passionate enthusiasm by the usually dour baker; tired pilots gave up their cherished free time to comb the jungle for exquisite orchids; a wistful nurse contributed a hoarded pair of nylons; even the patients, difficult as it must have been, managed to make or find some small token.

By noon of the wedding day the Chaplain was on hand, the mess hall was gaily decorated, the khaki-clad bride was radiant. A half hour passed, an hour, but there was no groom, no Rick!

Then a young pilot approached Shirley, awkward and embarrassed, extending a letter and a tiny package.

"Lieut. Chambers asked me to give you this," he said gravely.

Shirley caught her breath and her eyes filled with quick tears. She was as angry as she was helpless.

"Sorry, Lieutenant," the young pilot said quietly, "but c'est la guerre—or have you already heard that?"

GEORGIA CRAIG

NURSE WITH WINGS

Original title "Flight Nurse"

AVON BOOK DIVISION
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1

Shirley Andrews R.N., came briskly along the corridor of St. Christopher's Hospital, her arms burdened with a big pottery jar that held at least three dozen gorgeous red roses. In her trimly fitting white uniform, the tiny white cap topping her brown curls, Shirley made a very pretty picture, and the nurse who stepped from Room 314 paused and nodded approvingly.

"Hi, Andy!" she said, and then her eyes widened and she gasped, "Ye gods, what posies! What they cost would feed a family of five for a week!"

"Aren't they heavenly?"

"For Miss Gotrocks, I have no doubt," observed Mary Paige.

"Who else?" agreed Shirley.

"Who else, indeed? With a Poppa who's got a private key to the mint, and a boy friend with more gold than's buried at Ft. Knox— Naturally, they're for Miss Gotrocks! How *is* the little darling, by the way?"

"Oh, she's doing beautifully," answered Shirley. "She'll be going home in a day or two."

"And there's an ugly rumor lifting its head here and there about these dim old corridors that you're going with her," observed Mary. "You poor lamb!"

Shirley laughed. "Oh, don't be a dimwit! She wants me to go for a week or two. Her doctor has ordered it and who am I to talk back to a doctor?"

"She needs a nurse about as much as I need two heads," observed Mary dryly. "Mark my words, she'll use you for a football."

"Oh, she's not that bad, Mary," protested Shirley. "She's terribly young, of course—"

"My dear young idjit, the gal is twenty-two, which, if I remember correctly, is your age exactly," Mary pointed out.

"Oh I know—but Katrina Sutphen was born with a silver spoon in her mouth."

"Too bad she didn't choke on it in infancy."

"And she's been wrapped in cotton wool since the day she

was born," Shirley went on. "I've been out making my own way in the world since I was sixteen. That makes me years and years older than she is. And she's perfectly beautiful, and men do wingdings over her, and her father is enormously rich. Taking all that into consideration, she's really nice."

"Phooey! She's got a temper like a wild cat. She's spiteful and malicious and sly and conniving—" began Mary explosively.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mary, have a heart! She got you a call-down you didn't deserve, and had you dismissed from her case—"

"Dismissed? My angel child, I'd have poisoned her if I'd stayed on her case five minutes longer!" Mary cut in swiftly, and then she grinned and gave Shirley a friendly pat on the shoulder and her voice warmed. "All right, kidlet, you run along all wide-eyed and sure that everybody's a darned good egg; I'll go on being a cross-eyed misanthrope—"

Her voice broke off as the elevator door opened and she whispered swiftly, "Break it up! Here comes Tall Tanned and Terrific.

Shirley's heart gave a little leap as she turned her head to see a tall, suntanned young man in the summer uniform of an Air Force pilot come striding down the corridor. It was, she told herself savagely, perfectly idiotic for her heart to do nip-ups and stick in her throat every time she looked at Lieutenant Rick Chambers. In the first place, she scarcely knew the man; in the second place—

"Oh, hello there," said Rick. His voice was a pleasant baritone, his smile a flash of white teeth in his sun-bronzed face. "You're Miss Andrews, aren't you? How is she today?"

"She's doing nicely, Lieutenant," answered Shirley, hoping her voice was the calm, assured one proper for a nurse. "I was just taking your roses in to her. They're perfectly beautiful."

Rick Chambers beamed at her. "Do you think she'll like 'em? I tried to get orchids, but of course—no dice."

"Oh, but these are ever so much more beautiful. They'll be such a lovely splash of color."

Rick had turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. Inside the room, another Army pilot was bending over the girl who sat propped up against cushions, and their kiss endured for an instant after the door opened. The girl saw Rick and the nurse across the shoulder of the other man, whom she

pushed away gently, turning a calm, unruffled face to greet Rick.

"But, Rick, how nice of you!" she said eagerly. "Do come in. For heaven's sake, don't be coy!"

To Shirley, as the three talked lightly, it seemed indecent for a girl to turn as coolly as that from her lover's kiss. For the man who had been kissing her when the door opened was Lieutenant Jonny Derwent, and he and Katrina were to be married within a few weeks!

Katrina was chattering gaily, as though she hadn't just been kissed by the man she loved. Her eyes fell upon the roses Shirley was arranging and she said eagerly, "Oh, Miss Andrews, aren't they beautiful? Who sent them?"

Rick beamed happily, a trifle self-consciously. Katrina put out a hand and closed it hard over his and thanked him with her eyes as much as with her soft, sweet voice.

Shirley busied herself while the three talked. The room was not at all like a hospital room. It was large and airy, and many-windowed. The walls were a soft, sunshiny yellow, and the hand-blocked linen curtains at the windows carried a pattern of ivy leaves in delicate greens and grays. The bath was a marvel of perfection. Obviously the girl who occupied this, the St. Christopher's finest suite—at a weekly rate that would have covered the cost of a rare and expensive operation and weeks of post-operative care—was somebody of importance. The truth was that Ronald Sutphen and his wife had given the hospital to the resort town and had endowed it handsomely. This suite had been designed especially for the Sutphens and their friends, so, naturally, when the Sutphens' only child had to have an operation for appendicitis at the end of the gay and brilliant winter season, the yellow suite had been made ready for her occupancy.

Shirley had arranged the roses on the table, and was about to slip out of the room when Katrina said gaily, "Did you boys know Miss Andrews is going home with me for a couple of weeks? To keep me from being lonely and bored now that all my crowd has gone home?"

"That's swell!" said Rick. His eyes had gone swiftly to Jonny and back to Katrina, and then to Shirley before he spoke.

"She's just before shaking the dust of St. Christopher off her feet, by the way—for the duration" Katrina went on, smiling at Shirley. "She's climbing into a uniform and going off to war."

"The uniform she's wearing's not bad," said Jonny admiringly.

"I'm changing it for the uniform of an Army nurse," said Shirley.

"Gosh! That's wonderful!" said Jonny.

"I understand the Army needs nurses badly," contributed Rick. "We'll all be very grateful, I'm sure."

There was an undertone to his voice that puzzled Shirley, but she only answered quietly, "I hope that I can be of service."

"Just looking at you will do the fellows good," Jonny contributed handsomely.

"Thanks a lot." Shirley's smile was light, but her voice sincere. "I'm waiting now for orders to report to the Army for assignment for training."

Katrina, who did not like being left out of any picture for any length of time, said with plaintive sweetness, "I hate to be a bother, Miss Andrews, but isn't it time for my medicine?"

Rick and Jonny turned anxiously to her, but Shirley, with a glance at her watch, smiled and said, "Not for almost forty minutes, Miss Sutphen. Would you like some orange juice?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Katrina pettishly. Shirley faded out of the room, having already learned in the two or three weeks since she had been Katrina's nurse, that the young lady did not care in the least for competition in the shape of attractive girls, whether they were nurses or not.

She wasn't at all sure that she was going to like being Katrina's nurse when the girl went home. There was really no need at all for Katrina to have a nurse, since her maid and the other servants would be quite able to take care of her. But St. Christopher's owed so much to the Sutphens that it was difficult for the head of staff to refuse permission for Katrina to take Shirley home with her for a week or two. And Shirley expected her orders to come from the Army Nurse Corps within that time, and would soon be leaving the hospital anyway.

Rick and Jonny both appeared at the hospital to see that Katrina reached home in safety. There was a family limousine that looked, to Shirley's incredulous eyes, at least a block long, and she recognized it as a Rolls-Royce. Katrina, looking pale and fragile, her blond curls tied back from her face with a blue ribbon that matched her blue brocaded housecoat, her feet in silly little blue satin slippers, was helped down the steps and

into the big car by Jonny and Rick, who touched her as though she were a beautifully iridescent soap bubble that the slightest touch would destroy. Shirley, coming behind them, carrying the satin and lace pillows that Katrina had felt necessary for her stay in the hospital, was amused at the solicitude of the two men. She knew that Katrina was in perfect health; she had recuperated beautifully from the operation and she could have danced down the steps, unaided, and walked a dozen blocks without harm, if she had wanted to. Behind Shirley was a middle-aged maid laden with suitcases.

When Shirley had helped to make Katrina comfortable on the back seat, with Johnny and Rick assisting her anxiously, she hesitated as to where she herself should sit. The maid had already climbed in with the chauffeur, and Johnny sat protectively beside Katrina, holding her hand.

Rick said quickly, "Here, you sit here, Nurse," and Shirley knew a tiny stab at the realization that he had forgotten her name.

"This is quite all right," she answered and drew down one of the folding seats, so that she sat facing them.

Rick started to protest, but Katrina said sweetly, in the patient long-suffering tone that Shirley suspected was going to get her a great many little special services in the future, "Do settle it, Rick, so that we can start. I don't feel very well."

Instantly Rick sat beside her. She slipped her hand in his and smiled from him to Jonny and settled herself with a little purring murmur like a lovely golden kitten.

The limousine slipped away from the curb and moved like a long, sleek ghost, across the cream-colored bridge with its big amber-colored fog lanterns, and into the loveliness that was Palm Beach.

Shirley lifted her head and sniffed delightedly of the cool fragrance from the ocean, tinged with the scent of flowers. It was mid-April, and the hectic social season that lasts no more than six or seven weeks in Palm Beach, was over. Most of the homes and all of the finest hotels—those that had not been turned over to the government—were closed. But the trees were lushly green, the grass was like a well-cleaned carpet, the hibiscus was in riotous bloom, and here and there the lovely scented pompoms of pink and white and scarlet oleander were unfolding. The waters of Lake Worth were rippled blue satin as a little breeze danced over it.

As they crossed the bridge and turned south down County Road, there was the glimpse of the ocean that always stopped the breath in Shirley's throat, from sheer delight in its loveliness. Royal Palm Way, bordered with palms that rose until they seemed to brush the sky, the grass at their feet plush-green, bright beds of flowers breaking the greenness, marched straight before them, two full long blocks; and beyond, the palms framed a vista of sparkling turquoise blue sea, broken by only a long, creamy breaker. For an instant, between the trees, a ship stood out, so close in that clear, bright atmosphere that one felt one could almost reach out and touch it. A dirty, grimy old tanker, it was, but the United States flag was freshly painted along its sides, and lines from a poem she had read came into Shirley's head:

"Like a painted ship, on a painted sea—"

"Rolling down to Rio," commented Jonny as he watched the tanker.

A moment later a big khaki-painted bomber from the base at Morrison Field swept over their heads, so close they could almost glimpse the man in the cockpit. With a great roar the plane flew out, circled low over the tanker, dipped once or twice, and then roared away.

"Not much chance of getting away with anything while the boys are on their toes like that," Jonny said, and he and Rick grinned at each other.

The Sutphen estate was one of several show places that make Palm Beach of never ending interest to the tourist. The big stucco house fronted the ocean, but the gardens at the back sloped down to the lake. It was the gardens that made the place best known of all, for a vast fortune had been spent on them. It was, to Shirley, a place of enchantment.

But today she had no time even to glance at it as the big limousine rolled in at wide-open gates, which were promptly closed by a middle-aged man who snapped a very businesslike looking padlock into place.

They were greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Sutphen. Mrs. Sutphen was a pleasant, middle-aged woman, still a little surprised at having given birth to Katrina at an age when she and her husband had both decided they were not to have a child at all. She was fond of Katrina, but a little frightened of her, still. As for her husband, Ronald, he had never felt that he knew Katrina

very well, but he was enormously proud of her and indulged her most extravagant whims.

There was considerable excitement and running to and fro to get Katrina installed in her own quarters. When Jonny and Rick would have taken themselves away, Katrina clung to them and said, "Oh, no, you're going to stay for dinner. Miss Andrews and I refuse to be left alone!"

Jonny hesitated, and looked quickly at Shirley.

"You don't think it would be bad for her? I mean, you don't think she needs to rest?" he inquired anxiously.

Shirley barely managed not to smile, knowing well how little Katrina needed anything but amusement.

"I'm quite sure it will be all right," she answered soothingly. "I know she's bored from being at the hospital so long, and I'm sure it will do her good to have you stay!"

Jonny beamed with delight.

"Come along, boys," said Mrs. Sutphen cheerfully. "I'll give you a cocktail while Katrina gets dressed."

When the door had closed behind the others Katrina looked up at Shirley and made a little gesture of disgust.

"Look, Shirley— You don't mind if I call you Shirley? Miss Andrews is too utterly putrid! Do, for goodness' sake, get out of that uniform and into something a bit gayer."

Shirley said quietly, "I'm sorry, Miss Sutphen, but I'm afraid I brought only uniforms, since I understood this was a professional visit."

Katrina grinned at her like an engaging child. "Well, it wasn't, a bit," she said. "I knew I'd be bored to death over here with everybody gone—and having Jonny and Rick both about all the time, I thought it would be nice to have another girl around. You see?"

Shirley nodded. "I see," she answered, "but you should have let me know, so that I could have brought something besides uniforms."

Katrina shrugged. "Oh, that doesn't matter," she drawled. "I've tons of clothes here I'll never be able to wear out. You and I are close enough to the same size, and I'm sure Marthe can fix you up with things. We usually stick to pajamas, shorts, or bathing suits in the daytime, anyway—and Marthe will have plenty of time to alter a few evening things for you."

She looked up at Shirley quickly and her voice warmed and she smiled ingratiatingly. "You won't mind? The boys won't

know they are my clothes, and after all, what difference does it make?" she coaxed. "It's just that I've seen starched uniforms and white jackets at the hospital until I feel I'll scream if I have to see another! And you're much too pretty to always wear a white uniform."

Shirley laughed. "You're very kind, Miss Sutphen—" she began.

"If I'm going to call you Shirley, why shouldn't you call me Katrina?"

"Of course, if you want me to—"

Katrina nodded. "It would be stupid, otherwise," she said. "As soon as I'm able to travel—or as soon as Jonny can get as much as a week-end pass—we'll be leaving here. Palm Beach is grand when there are a lot of people here and it's gay and there are parties and everything, but it's pretty deadly now. Maybe I didn't really need a nurse, but I need a companion for the next couple of weeks, desperately!"

"I'll be glad to stay until my orders come," answered Shirley. "Of course that may be tomorrow or next day—"

"Oh, we'll worry about that when they come," Katrina dismissed the subject lightly. "And now let's see about getting you out of that white uniform!"

2

Shirley was standing before the full-length mirror in Katrina's beautiful boudoir, while the maid took deft and experienced tucks here and there in the pale pink moire dress that Katrina, rather than Shirley, had selected. Katrina, watching from the chaise-longue, asked suddenly, "What do you think of Rick?"

Shirley was grateful that at the moment she stood with her back to Katrina, so that Katrina could not see the warm flush that stained her pretty face.

"Lieutenant Chambers? Why—he's—very nice, isn't he?" she said and was glad that her voice sounded light and casual.

In anyone less dainty than Katrina, her little sniff would have been almost a snort. "Nice? He's perfectly super, and you know it. Any woman with eyes in her head would! He's—well, he's something special."

Shirley said lightly, "The other nurses at the hospital used to call him 'Tall Tanned and Terrific'."

Katrina selected a cigarette and lit it, smiling a little curious smile through the blue smoke. "Did they, now?" she drawled, as though amused. "His closest friends sometimes call him 'Featherfoot'—though only his *very* closest friends dare dry it!"

Shirley looked puzzled.

"Featherfoot? But what an odd name! How on earth did he ever get such a name?" she wondered aloud.

Katrina smiled. "A critic reviewing one of his shows spoke of him as 'the feather-footed Mr. Chambers', and it annoyed Rick terribly. So his close friends, as close friends often will, picked it up and used it to tease him with. I doubt if there are half a dozen people, including Jonny and me, who dare use it to him even now."

Shirley asked quickly, "You mean Lieutenant Chambers was on the stage?"

Katrina's lovely eyebrows went up a little.

"You mean you didn't recognize him?" she asked incredulously. "My dear girl, Rick Chambers was one of the foremost dancing stars of America in pre-Pearl Harbor days! He starred in musical comedy and in night clubs from the time he was sixteen or so. He was practically born on the stage. His father and mother were a vaudeville song-and-dance team. Rick learned to dance almost before he learned to walk; he learned to sing before he stopped talking baby talk. The night club and theater world practically went into mourning when he enlisted. It was too silly of him, too. I feel perfectly sure he could have been exempted, or at least deferred—but no, just because he was an expert flyer, he had to rush out and enlist almost before the bombs stopped falling on Pearl Harbor!"

Shirley felt her heart beat faster, and the color was warm in her cheeks. "I think that was pretty fine of him," she said quietly, but there was a quality in her voice that made Katrina look at her with sudden sharpness.

"Oh, I suppose so—only it seems a shame. He's really a superb dancer—and the way he looks behind footlights is something to dream about!"

Shirley laughed and said, "Well, there's nothing wrong with the way he looks in ordinary everyday sunlight, either!"

Katrina eyed her with a sudden sharp scrutiny, and then her white lids drooped above her very blue eyes, and she smiled, a

small, secret, almost derisive smile. "Of course not," she said sweetly. "You'd be surprised how many women think that—and how annoyed it makes Rick. He loathes hero-worshippers and celebrity-hunters, and runs like the dickens when anybody tries to talk to him about his days in show business."

Marthe, from her position on her knees at Shirley's feet, said in her quiet, colorless voice, "I think that will do nicely now, miss. You can wear it safely this evening, and in the morning, if you will fit any others you want altered, I can do a neater job."

Shirley looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was charming: the moire rather stiff, yet falling in sculptured folds from the snug bodice, a décolletage revealing a white throat and beautiful shoulders. The color made her skin look like new milk, and brought out burnished lights in her chestnut-brown hair.

"Nice," said Katrina. "You look charming. I never liked that dress. It always made me feel like a French bonbon—one of those pink sugar ones that give you a terrific tummy-ache."

Shirley laughed. "Well, it's the loveliest thing I ever wore in all my life and I'm mad about it, and you're terribly nice to lend it to me," she said gratefully.

Katrina shrugged. "My dear I'm giving it to you. I'd never dare wear it again, after seeing the way you look in it," and before Shirley could reply, Katrina was saying briskly to Marthe, "I think I'll wear that Chinese blue tulle, the one with silver embroidery— Or will that makes us look too much like a sister act in vaudeville?"

Shirley laughed. "I'm sure I don't mind, if you don't," she said.

"Then if you'll run along, I'll let Marthe help me, and we'll go down together." Katrina spoke with the air of one so accustomed to giving orders that she could not realize she might give offense by such careless dismissal.

"Of course," said Shirley. She crossed the big bathroom that opened out of the boudoir and led to her room on the other side.

The room was large and beautifully furnished and looked out over the famous sunken gardens. The afternoon light was dying. The sun had already gone but there was a lonely afterglow that seemed to add a special enchantment to the scene.

Shirley looked down over a broad terrace, flagstoned in an

artful "hit or miss" fashion, with carefully barbered velvety green grass growing between the stones; there were white-painted iron chairs, cushioned in waterproof stuff patterned in brilliant stripes, a glass-topped, white-painted iron table here and there was laden with books and magazines, and one or two of them held potted plants in brackets. The terrace was obviously an outdoor living room, and the view from it was breathtaking.

There were five shallow stone steps from the terrace down to the sunken garden. In the center was a small oblong pool where tropical water lilies of every exquisite color imaginable floated in the dying light like winged things. There were great beds of flowers, formally arranged, and against the high cream-colored wall was a brilliant splash of bougainvillaea, scarlet and salmon-pink, blooming riotously as only an expert gardener can persuade them to bloom. There were a few orange trees, and the scent from their late blossoming was delicate and tantalizing, though their branches were starred with ripening fruit.

From her window, Shirley could look beyond the wall, where the broad road curled around it, and to the green parklike space that led down to the private dock where the Sutphen yacht usually rode at anchor. Though now, the Sutphen yacht, sold to the government for the traditional dollar, probably rode at anchor off some far-off South Sea island or carried on the work of the war in some less picturesque spot. The grass of the park was as velvet smooth, as carefully tended as that of the garden. On either side, great oleander bushes leaned and tossed their swelling buds and their few early blossoms in the quickening wind. Tied up to the little pier that once had berthed the big yacht, there were several mahogany and brass speed boats and a small cabin cruiser of the type used for deep-sea fishing.

For a moment, as she stood there surveying all the exquisite, artful beauty of the place, Shirley was a little depressed. The evidences of vast wealth all about her frightened her a little. She had made her own way in the world since her fifteenth birthday, when, at the death of her mother, she had taken the tiny legacy of insurance and invested it in an education; she felt herself an alien in this world made soft and gentle and elegant by so much money.

She had gone to school in the daytime, worked in a cafeteria in the afternoons and evenings, and had been grateful that the job provided her meals and a few dollars a week for absolute

necessities. Since she had graduated from the training school and had begun to receive an adequate salary she had felt almost rich. But she could have laughed at such a thought here, in this setting. Why, no doubt Marthe, the maid, received a far larger salary than Shirley could ever hope to receive. It was not that she envied anyone; she loved her profession and was almost fiercely proud of her right to put the letters "R.N." after her name. But being here with the Sutphens was opening her eyes to an entirely new world, one as foreign to her as if she had been suddenly transported to Mars.

Suddenly she laughed, lifted the smooth white shoulders in a little shrug, and reminded herself, "After all, it's an experience. Be grateful for it!"

She was remembering the stern-faced nurse who had been her first teacher in the hospital's training school. All the girls had been a little frightened of the rather fierce "Old Lady"—she wasn't really old, except by the standards of wide-eyed girls of seventeen and eighteen—but she had been a fine nurse and a superb instructor. And every girl who had ever trained under her was familiar with her manner of scolding anyone careless enough or untrained enough to make a mistake; any catastrophe, whether frightening or amusing, brought, following the inevitable "dressing down," the comforting words, spoken in the "Old Lady's" clipped New England tones, "After all, it was an experience. Be grateful for it and profit by it! As a nurse you have to know a great deal about human nature; if you look on every encounter as an experience, and try to gain something from it, you'll soon get over being frightened or upset when something goes wrong."

Now with a vaguely ominous feeling, a portent of some ugly thing to come, Shirley remembered the "Old Lady's" words and laughed a little. She turned away from the garden as there came a knock at the door, and Marthe stood there saying, "Miss Katrina's ready to go down, miss."

Shirley came out into the wide hall, and found Katrina waiting. And Katrina was so lovely that she all but took Shirley's breath away—golden-haired, blue-eyed, with exquisite skin and a body that was delightfully molded. The dull blue and silver frock was the final note of complete enchantment. Shirley had never seen Katrina in anything but the frivolous chiffon and lace nightgowns and negligees and bed jackets she had used at the hospital, and so she had not been prepared for this vision.

"Why are you staring? Is something wrong?" demanded Katrina pettishly.

The two girls paused at the stair-head, as Shirley said quickly, "Of course not! I've never seen anything so perfectly right! You—well, you really *are* beautiful."

Katrina laughed with pleasure. "I *feel* beautiful, after all those hideous things they did to me in the hospital and the awful things I had to wear. Shall we go down? I'm starved, aren't you?"

Before Shirley could answer, there was a little shout from the foot of the stairs, and Jonny and Rick came leaping up, eyes alight, laughing; but neither of them had eyes for Shirley—they both seemed entranced by Katrina.

"Zounds, woman, but you're gorgeous!" said Jonny in simple heartfelt tribute.

"That goes double," said Rick, and he and Jonny bowed low. "Madame, your couriers await. Think you that for one little moment we would permit those fairy feet to tread their own way down these stairs? But, no, madame—no indeed! It is unthinkable!"

Katrina laughed, her blue eyes dancing. "If you think for one moment I'm going to dine up here alone—"

"But, madame, no, no. That, too, is unthinkable" protested Rick. Then he and Jonny thrust out their hands and clasped them together, making a "chair." They bowed low to Katrina. "If you will but trust yourself to us, madame—?"

Katrina laughed like a pleased child, settled herself in the "chair," and slipped an arm about the shoulders of each of the men. And as carefully as though she were some rare and precious bit of spun glass, they bore her gently down the stairs and into the big drawing room.

Shirley followed, unnoticed, amused. The drawing room was the length of the house and almost half the width, with windows overlooking the ocean at one end and the lake at the other, and French doors opening on the terrace. There a long table was being spread by a white-coated butler and a maid. There were hurricane candles spaced along the length of the table, and a great bowl of blue and white delphinium and pink roses centered it.

Mr. and Mrs. Sutphen were both so gracious to Shirley that she began to feel at home even in this luxury and beauty, an atmosphere she had never known before in her life, and which

she had small hope of experiencing again. For once her orders came through and she became an Army nurse, there would be no more private nursing, no more multi-millionaire patients.

Seated about the glass-topped table on the terrace, one wall of the house jutting out to protect them from the brisk wind off the ocean, they were very gay. Or rather Jonny and Rick were, vying with each other to entertain Katrina and assure her of their delight that she was at home again.

Now and then Rick turned to Shirley, attempting to draw her into their brisk, amusing chatter, but Shirley was content merely to be a looker-on, and smilingly kept herself back so that Katrina might be the center of the picture on her first night at home.

And she welcomed the opportunity to study Rick a little more closely. He was terribly good-looking, she told herself; she would have liked seeing him on the stage, dancing. She could well believe Katrina's remark that he was "something very special" behind the footlights. But being Shirley, she thought he was much better-looking in the uniform of his country, trained and fit and trim, ready for action.

Before the evening was over, Shirley began to have a little uneasy feeling that she tried hard to down, without quite managing to do so. It was the feeling that while Katrina was engaged to Jonny, she was deeply interested emotionally in Rick. Shirley struggled to get rid of the idea, but once it had crept into her mind, it became clearer every moment.

There was no doubting that Jonny was deeply in love with Katrina. It was in every look he gave her, in the tone of his voice when he spoke her name, in the way his hand managed to touch hers and cling on any or no provocation. Katrina was very sweet to him; obviously she was in love with him, else why would she be marrying him? There could be no thought that she was attracted by any such material consideration as money, since the Sutphen fortune exceeded the Derwent's and the name was older. So there could be no reason for Katrina to marry Jonny except that she was in love with him.

And yet, once or twice Shirley caught a look in Katrina's eyes as she watched Rick, that made her deeply curious and distinctly uncomfortable. It was obvious, too, that Rick more than liked and admired Katrina. What a mess that would be, Shirley thought, if Rick and Katrina *were* in love and had discovered it too late.

Rick and Jonny had been close friends for years. They had studied flying together, and once they had received their private licenses, Jonny had bought a plane and they had flown it together, with nobody ever really being quite sure to whom the plane actually belonged, since both used it.

They had been together the afternoon of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Rick had been working in a benefit somewhere, and Jonny had been in the audience. In the midst of Rick's performance, the shocking, incredible news had been flashed. The audience had been stunned; Rick had walked off stage in the middle of his number and nobody except Jonny had noticed. In the dressing room Jonny had found Rick getting into his street clothes. For a moment they had merely stared at each other, still not quite able to take in the fact that while her ambassadors had been smilingly engaged in "peace talks" in Washington, Japan had sent a murderous attack on America's heart.

"Well, Jonny," said Rick at last and Jonny had nodded.

"This is for us, Rick." They had gripped hands hard and gone off together to join up.

All this Shirley knew by now. And that Rick should lift so much as a finger to take the fiancée of his friend was incredible. Yet before the evening was over, Shirley was convinced in her heart that Rick was deeply in love with Katrina, and that Katrina returned that affection.

Tossing in the blissfully comfortable bed that night, trying to make herself go to sleep, Shirley wished that she hadn't seen the truth and tried without success to convince herself that it hadn't been the truth. She was just imagining things. Jonny and Katrina were perfectly mated; their marriage was exactly right! They belonged to the same social world, they had mutual friends, mutual tastes. Katrina surely would not throw all that away even for a man like Rick Chambers; nor, Shirley told herself severely, would Rick let her! But it was a long time before she was able to make herself go to sleep.

3

Accustomed to early rising, Shirley awoke long before anyone else in the big house. The day was glorious and the ocean

sparkled a gay invitation. She slid out of bed, found the pajamas that Marthe had provided for her last night, and was surprised to discover the completeness of the wardrobe Marthe had selected from her mistress' belongings and installed in the closet of Shirley's room.

She grinned, and donned the pajamas, beautiful ones of flowered cotton that were very becoming. She slipped out of the house, and along a path that she felt sure would lead to the bulkhead that did its best to hold back the ocean. Below it there was the bright blue of the roof of a cabana, and Shirley nodded to herself in satisfaction.

She found the steps down the bulkhead and walked up the cabana steps. The door was unlocked, and inside she found a number of small dressing rooms opening off the one large room that was a sort of game room. There was a supply of bathing suits, as she had guessed there would be. And so she donned one, and swam for a while, and then lay flat on her back and let the morning sunshine have its way with her, until she felt that she had had as much sun as it was wise to take in one day.

Back in the cabana, she showered, climbed once more into the gaily flowered pajamas, and went back across the beach and up the steps to the garden path. She sincerely hoped that by now somebody was up in the house, for her swim had given her an enormous appetite. She was heartened at the scent of coffee as she passed the service entrance. She came in through the wide hall just as Mrs. Sutphen, very brisk and competent looking in a blue and white coverall came down the stairs.

"Oh, good morning, Miss Andrews. I do hope you're comfortable and happy?" said Mrs. Sutphen cheerfully.

"Very much so, thank you, Mrs. Sutphen," answered Shirley, in sincere liking for the lady.

"That's splendid!" beamed Mrs. Sutphen. "Have you had your breakfast?"

"No, I've been having a swim. The water was glorious."

"I imagine so," agreed Mrs. Sutphen, as though she had never investigated the matter for herself. "Hoskins will get your breakfast. I'm afraid I shall have to hurry off. It's my day at the canteen. Do make yourself perfectly at home, Miss Andrews, won't you?"

"Thank you, I'd like to," said Shirley, and Mrs. Sutphen bustled off to where a station wagon waited for her in the drive.

The butler was bowing before Shirley, asking where she would

like her breakfast. She said eagerly, "If it isn't too much trouble, I'd love having it on the terrace. It's such a glorious morning."

"It is, indeed, miss," answered the butler as though he himself had had something to do with the beauty of the morning and was glad she was pleased with his efforts.

Breakfast was, as she had known it would be, a marvel of perfectly chilled melon, exquisitely golden-brown toast, and coffee that bore very little resemblance to the sturdy brew usually served in the hospital dining room.

Afterwards, Shirley wandered to her heart's content in the beautiful gardens. When the sun became a little too ardent, she went back to the vast library, where her eyes sparkled with keen appreciation at the shelves that ran from floor to ceiling, and that held a great many books she had longed to read.

It was after luncheon, once more served to Shirley in solitary state on the terrace, that Katrina finally appeared, slim and boyish, yet undeniably feminine, too, in sharkskin slacks and a blue and white halter, her golden curls in a tangle about her shoulders.

"Heavens, but you're energetic," she complained, as she discovered Shirley. "I daresay you've had a swim and a walk and perhaps a bicycle trip already."

Shirley laughed. "No, I've been shamefully lazy. I have had a swim and a prowl in the garden. For the rest, I've just sat with a book."

Katrina nodded as though she had no further interest.

Shirley said after a moment, "Look, Miss Sutphen— All right, then, Katrina," she smilingly accepted the little murmured correction, "you haven't a speck of use for me. I'm just lounging around doing nothing, and it's absurd. There's probably lots of work I should be doing at the hospital."

Katrina said curtly, "Nonsense. I arranged with Dr. Parsons that you were to stay until your orders came through. And that's settled. I'm sure a few days rest won't do you any harm. They kept you on the jump back there at the hospital."

She was silent a moment, blue eyes narrowed just a little, and then she said coolly, "Besides, I'd like you to be maid of honor at my wedding."

Shirley's eyes widened and she caught her breath on a little surprised exclamation. "Oh, but surely there must be dozens of your friends who would want that honor."

Katrina's rosebud of a mouth was touched with a derisive

little smile. "Honor? Really, Shirley, you *are* being absurd. And any way, all my crowd has left for the season. I'm sure none of them would appreciate being dragged back here just to help me marry Jonny, when most of them have been trying for ages to snag him for themselves! No, I'd like you. After all, I owe you a great deal. You *did* save my life, that night when the stitches in my incision gave way."

"The stitches wouldn't have given way, Katrina, if you hadn't tried to walk in your sleep."

Katrina shrugged. "Maybe—but the fact is that you saved my life and I'd like to do something to show my appreciation! You'll be leaving the hospital soon, anyway, and you might as well stay here. I'd think you'd be grateful for a chance to build yourself up a bit. I understand the physical requirements for Army nurses are pretty stiff, and you do look a bit rundown and nervy. No wonder, as hard as you've had to work. No, my mind's quite made up. You are to stay here and be my maid of honor! And that's definite."

It was obvious that Katrina was a young lady to whom very few people said "no". She was not accustomed to any resistance to her wishes, or her demands, and after all, Shirley had to admit that there was something to her statement that the physical requirements for Army nurses were strict. And Shirley knew herself to be overtired, and that she would pass the examinations much more easily after a few days of such rest as she had enjoyed today. So she offered no more objections, assured Katrina of her appreciation of the honor of being asked to serve at her wedding, and the matter was dropped.

Late in the afternoon Jonny and Rick appeared, beaming and ready for an evening of amusement. Jonny said, almost at once, "Dry your tears, sweet. I'm going to be able to marry you after all!"

Katrina eyed him with an odd little look halfway between amusement and exasperation. "Oh, that's wonderful, angel," she cooed. "I'd probably go into a decline and waste away if you abandoned me now!"

"Of course, I know you would," said Jonny grinning warmly at her. "But I've got a pass for this coming week-end and since we've already got a license, we can be married Friday evening and depart immediately on our honeymoon!"

"Oh?" Katrina's voice was silky. "And where, angel dear, will we go on our honeymoon?"

Jonny beamed. "I knew you'd ask that! Well, it happens I can answer it, too! There's a villa at the Everglades that is even now being turned into a honeymoon nest for a couple of newlyweds!"

Katrina stared. "The Everglades? Jonny, do you mean we're actually going away on a honeymoon? Why, it must be all of four blocks from here to the Everglades. How shall we go, by train, bus or plane?" she demanded in a tone of mock amazement.

"Wheelchair, sweet—a nice, shiny, far-from-new, but immaculately laundered wicker wheel-chair propelled by a beaming black boy—Oscar, by name. Remember him?"

"Oscar? But wasn't he the boy who rode us around so much last winter, and the winter before?" asked Katrina.

"The same!" beamed Jonny. "He claimed he had 'retired.' He must be sixty if he's a minute, but when I told him we'd be on our honeymoon, without gas and the like, he went back in business again—for the week-end, anyway!"

Katrina laughed. Rick had been listening with an indulgent smile, as at the playful capering of two children of whom he was very fond.

He turned to Shirley and asked soberly, "Do you think they are old enough to get married, Miss Andrews?"

"They look about fifteen!" Shirley admitted.

"And behave as though they were five!" Rick finished gravely.

Katrina wrinkled her pretty nose at him impudently. There was an odd, almost frightened look in the depths of her blue eyes, though her voice was very gay as she scoffed, "Your long white beard is very becoming, Gram'pa. Tell us, what did you do in the Civil War?"

Rick drew himself up haughtily and said sternly, "Ah'd have y'all know, Honey-chile, it wa'n't no Civil War. Hit'all wa'r a War 'tween the States, Ah'd have y'all know!"

Jonny grinned. "We've got some fellows out at the base who spend an awful lot of time correcting people for calling it a Civil War. Funny, you'd think when we've fought two or three wars since then, and are busy right now on one that seems a 'right smart-sized war' of its own, people would stop yelping 'Johnny Reb' and 'damn-Yankee,' wouldn't you?"

"I object!" said Katrina sharply. "We were talking about my wedding, and I object to having the conversation sidetracked to public wars!"

Jonny looked at her sharply.

"Hi, wait up! Are you insinuating, my precious, that our wedding is going to be a private war?" he demanded suspiciously.

Katrina looked like a spun-sugar angel, except for the slight impishness in her blue eyes, and her voice was dulcet when she murmured, "Well, of course, darling we'll keep it as private as we can, but I'm afraid my voice carries when I'm angry. And I might throw things—and—well, I'm afraid the neighbors may get just a hint now and then."

Jonny bent above her, as though he had completely forgotten Shirley and Rick, and his voice was a low murmur of tenderness. Rick touched Shirley's arm, smiled at her, and made a motion towards the garden and they slipped away, leaving Katrina and Jonny alone.

"That," said Rick, as he and Shirley went down the wide stone steps and to the garden, "is one marriage that's just got to click, or I'll never believe in marriage again as long as I live! They've got to be happy—that's all!"

Shirley looked at him curiously. "You're very fond of them, aren't you, Lieutenant Chambers?"

He looked down at her and his good-looking mouth was faintly touched with a smile. "Jonny is one of the best—the only really close friend I've ever had. We've been almost like brothers. I don't want him to have to go through the ugliness of an emotional smash-up, any more than I want to see Katrina hurt. She's such a wonderful little person. I've met a lot of girls born to her sort of life, and she's the only one of them not affected by it. She's real and honest. I can't think of anything nicer that could happen to both of them than to be married!"

Shirley drew a deep breath and turned her eyes away. For she had seen something in Rick Chambers' eyes that she did not believe he himself realized; she had seen that he was in love with Katrina, though he was probably not conscious of it. And she had already begun to suspect that Katrina cared more for him than she was willing to admit!

She was secretly appalled. She knew that Rick was completely honest in his desire that Jonny and Katrina might be happy. Yet —if Katrina were secretly more than a little in love with Rick, and yet was going to marry Jonny! And Rick was, without being quite aware of it, very much in love with Katrina—then what possible happiness could there be for any of the three?

Shirley acknowledged quite simply her own hurt. But it was silly, she reminded herself, to feel hurt or forlorn because Rick was in love with Katrina. She had had no business falling in love with him herself, and she had only herself to blame that she could never be anything to him except the nurse who took care of Katrina. And anyway, she reminded herself grimly, in a few days she would be away from here and out of touch with Rick, and she would set herself hard to work to rid her mind of the emotion for him. Once more she remembered the Old Lady's, "After all, it's an experience. Profit by it!" and gave a little chuckle that was not all merriment. Being hopelessly in love might easily be an experience from which she could gain profit, but she had to admit that it was not a very exhilarating one.

They heard Katrina's gay voice calling them back, and with an exchange of smiles, they turned and went back up the garden path and along the terrace to where Jonny and Katrina sat.

"It's all settled," announced Katrina gaily. "We're going to be married here on the terrace Friday night. You, Rick and Shirley, are to be our only attendants. And since all our friends have gone north, and it would be rather stupid to try to have anything like a reception in wartime, we are simply going to be married, clap our hats on our heads, and let Oscar drive us off on our honeymoon!"

"Sensible little thing, isn't she?" Jonny asked happily.

"Sensible? Sir, I'd have you know that's a deadly insult when addressed to the 'female of the species'," snapped Katrina. "You will apologize immediately!"

There was a good deal of such nonsense and laughter. When the men arose to go in order to be back at the base by midnight, Jonny and Katrina walked down the terrace together, until the shadows hid them and they were able to exchange a good-night kiss unseen by Rick and Shirley, who, elaborately unaware of such a maneuver, were walking the other way.

When the two men had gone, Katrina stood for a moment looking after them. There was a white, frightened look in her face when she turned, lifted her shoulders in a shrug, and said grimly, "Oh, well, there's always Reno—or Mexico City."

Shocked, Shirley protested, "Why, Katrina—what a thought for three days before your wedding!"

Katrina flung her an amused, derisive glance.

"Sorry, did I shock you? You're so painfully naive, my dear!"

She dropped into one of the brightly cushioned chaise-longues and reached for a cigarette. In the silvery flood of moonlight that by now had found the terrace, Shirley saw that her eyes were narrowed and that the expression about her mouth was almost ugly. She looked older, somehow, and predatory—not at all the sugar angel she had been when Rick and Jonny had been watching her.

Shirley said impulsively, "If you've changed your mind about Jonny, there's time to break it off."

Katrina looked at her coldly. "And have Rick despise me for the rest of my life?"

"But surely that would be better than to marry him with the thought in the back of your mind of—Reno or Mexico City," protested Shirley.

Katrina shook her head. "No, it wouldn't do! If Jonny would do something—give me some reason for breaking it off. But he won't, damn him! He's too faithful—Old Dog Tray! And Rick just about worships him. If I did anything to Jonny without good and sufficient reason Rick would never speak to me again!"

Shirley shivered a little beneath the impact of the girl's callousness. "And of course, since you're in love with Rick—"

Katrina swung her blue eyes, suddenly cold and ugly, to Shirley's face, and said through her teeth, "How did you know?"

"I couldn't help seeing it," Shirley answered simply.

Katrina frowned. "I've got to be more careful, then," she told herself casually.

"Look here, it would be much better for you just to tell Jonny the truth—" Shirley began impulsively, but the look Katrina gave her stopped the words on her lips.

"And why are you so interested in my affairs, my dear?" asked Katrina curtly.

Shirley set her teeth for a moment to steady her voice before she said quietly, "You are quite right, of course. It is none of my business, and I'm very sorry to have been intrusive. I think, if you will excuse me, I'll say good night."

As she turned towards the door, Katrina's voice, cool and light, yet acting like a hand laid on her shoulder, brought Shirley around to face her again.

"I do hope you have no such silly idea as trying to interfere between Jonny and me by peddling tales," drawled Katrina.

Shirley was so angry that she could not speak for a moment. Then she said curtly, "Naturally not! Even if I stooped to tale-

bearing, you know as well as I do that neither Lieutenant Chambers nor Lieutenant Derwent would believe a word I said."

Katrina nodded in satisfaction. "Of course not. So I'm glad you have sense enough not to try it!"

Shirley nodded and went across the terrace and into the house. She was blindly angry and her hands were trembling. But she sat down by the open window and made herself face facts calmly. She wanted to walk out of the house this moment and never again set eyes on any of the people here. But the hospital was under certain obligations to the Sutphens, and the Sutphens had arranged for Shirley to stay in the house for the convalescence of their daughter. Because she now despised the daughter, and knew her to be cheap and callous and selfish, Shirley had, she knew, no right to shirk her obligations as a nurse.

Even though she might report to the hospital that her professional services were not needed here, and could probably be recalled, there would be some unpleasantness, if the Sutphens insisted, as undoubtedly they would, that they were entitled to the services of a nurse for their daughter's convalescence. The nurse shortage was not so acute, in the early spring of 1943, with the vacationers almost all gone, as it would be later on. Shirley knew that her services were not badly needed and that she would be expected to stay on here until the Sutphens were willing for her to leave.

She drew a deep breath. Katrina and Jonny were to be married on Friday; this was Tuesday. And she would leave as soon as Katrina and Jonny left. She could surely stick it out for another two or three days for all that she disliked Katrina so thoroughly. Wanting her here was just a whim of Katrina's, of course—but Katrina's whims were rather potent things. Shirley smiled wryly as she remembered reading somewhere about "a woman with a whim of iron" and thought the description fitted Katrina very well indeed.

4

Although Katrina had complained bitterly that "there was nobody in town," it developed that this was one of her exaggerations. Her own gay and giddy crowd had flown north with

the birds; but there were a number of the more serious-minded, held there by what they felt to be war jobs, in civilian defense, in recreation and entertainment for the service people at the various military and naval establishments. So Mrs. Sutphen arranged a dinner party and dance, informal and impromptu, as a combined announcement and pre-wedding party. It was set for Thursday evening. There would be twenty-four dinner guests, and afterwards, others would come in to dance. It would be a typical wartime party, Mrs. Sutphen insisted; there would be music by radio and by the enormous musical machine; dinner would be simple and so would the later refreshments. But she enjoyed herself immensely and accepted gratefully Shirley's offer of assistance.

Thursday night, therefore, was very gay at the big house on the ocean front, and since it was warm enough, the house was thrown open. There were no lights in the beautiful sunken garden, for the moon was full and the beauty of its silvery mystery was too perfect to be spoiled by artificial lights.

Shirley, in a frock borrowed from Katrina's enormous wardrobe, busied herself unobtrusively assisting Mrs. Sutphen until that pleasant lady expressed her gratitude quite frankly. Dinner had been a success and Mr. Sutphen had ordered up from the celler some very fine champagne put away for this occasion a long time ago. In fact there was a bewildering store of very fine liquor set aside for the celebration of Katrina's wedding, and quite a bit of it was produced tonight.

Jonny, flushed and radiant, admitted frankly that he was "a bit high" when, at shortly before midnight, while Katrina was dancing with Rick, he approached Shirley and said, "You've been working like a beaver. How come you and I don't catch a bit of air in the garden? Me, I could stand a bit of fresh air. I'm afraid, though, I should warn you—I've had one or two over the eight, as the saying goes, but I sober up fast in the moonlight."

Shirley hesitated just a moment and Jonny peered at her suspiciously and demanded sternly, "Afraid?"

She laughed at him. "Of you? Don't be ridiculous!" she scoffed lightly and slipped her hand through the arm he offered.

"Hum-m-m!" He looked down at her owlishly as they walked out across the terrace and down the steps to the garden. "A pretty girl who thinks it's ridiculous to be afraid of me in the moonlight! I'm not too sure I like that! It's not a bit flattering."

"Don't tell me you'd prefer to be considered a wolf on the prowl! Lieutenant, I'm shocked!" she laughed.

He grinned, pleased. "That's better!" he said happily. "No guy likes to be considered too harmless, y'know!"

The garden was an enchanted place, the moonlight white and silver, broken into a soft mosaic by the shadows of the tall trees that fringed the garden, the brilliant beds of flowers robbed of their color by the tropic white of the night. The little pool gleamed like dark silver, its surface broken by the floating cups of the lilies.

At the foot of the garden path, with the house seeming far away from them, the sound of music coming faintly, Shirley paused and threw back her head and drew in a deep breath. The night wind was tangy with salt, fragrant with the scent of velvety stock and carnations and lemon verbena, the whole lightly touched with the exquisite fragrance of the orange blossoms that gleamed like tiny captive stars against the darkness of their leaves.

"What a heavenly night!" she said softly. "It's like a fairyland. It doesn't seem possible that there could be tragedy and heartbreak and horror anywhere in the world, does it?"

"For now, let's forget there is," said Jonny and there was a wryness about his good-looking young face, bitterness in his eyes. "For now—and until next Monday—I'm going to forget there's anything in the world but beauty and happiness and love!"

"I know," said Shirley softly and smiled at him.

The moonlight was a benediction on her face, in her eyes, and Jonny said quietly, "You're a nice little person, Shirley Andrews—a darned nice little person!"

She smiled warmly without answering. And Jonny, his eyes still on her lifted face, said huskily, "It would be pretty silly if I didn't kiss you, wouldn't it? A pretty girl and a kiss in the moonlight—"

He bent his head, and before she could evade him, he had kissed her, lightly, gently, a butterfly of a kiss. Neither of them would ever have remembered the moment again if, behind them out of the darkness of the hibiscus hedge a girl's small, heartbroken voice had not wailed softly, "Oh—Jonny—Jonny, how could you? How *could* you?"

Startled, Shirley and Jonny whirled about to face Katrina and Rick, who stood just behind them, only a few feet away. Shirley had a swift mental vision of how they must have looked, she and

Jonny silhouetted there in the moonlight, against the darkness in which Katrina and Rick had stood.

Jonny said swiftly, contritely, "Oh, for Pete's sake, honey—"

Rick, his eyes cold and sick with disgust, said grimly, "Nice going, Miss Andrews—*very* nice going!"

Shirley could not find words to answer him. The kiss had been such a casual, such a light and meaningless thing, and the sudden appearance of Rick and Katrina so unexpected, that, for the moment, words failed her; and she had a hot, miserable feeling that her very silence must look the guiltiest possible thing.

"Oh, Jonny—I *trusted* you. I—I—believed in you. I thought you loved me," wailed Katrina, the very picture of tortured love. "And you, Shirley—I thought you were my friend. Oh, Rick, Rick—take me back to the house!"

"Kat, wait—wait. Oh, you can't do this—" stormed Jonny.

But Katrina was tugging off his ring and when he did not reach to accept it, she dropped it at his feet. While Jonny stared at it unbelievingly, Katrina turned, broken and weeping, and with Rick's arm about her, stumbled back to the house.

Jonny bent and picked up the ring, turning it in his hands, staring at it, as though quite sure that the whole thing hadn't really happened. He looked from the ring to Shirley and said, running his fingers through his hair with a gesture that made him suddenly look oddly boyish and appealing:

"Oh, for gosh sakes, Shirley, what did she have to act like that for? Good grief, she knows it was just a kiss! That it didn't mean anything," he protested, hurt, bewildered.

Shirley drew a long breath and put her hand on his sleeve with an almost maternal gesture that sought to comfort him, even while she knew no comfort was possible.

"We were framed, pal!" She tried desperately for a gaiety she was far from feeling.

But Jonny only stared at her, frowning. "Framed?" he repeated. "I don't get you!"

"Don't you see, Jonny! She wanted to break her engagement to you, and she had to have a reason. So she jumped at this, knowing in her heart that it meant absolutely nothing, but glad—" Her voice died to silence beneath the look of anger and shock in his eyes.

"Oh?" he said after a moment. There was a bitter lash in his voice and she knew at that moment that he hated her. "And if

she wanted to break her engagement to me, what was stopping her? I didn't exactly stand over her with a shotgun, you know. She has been free to break her engagement to me, without any hocus-pocus, since the day I gave her this ring. And why should she want to break the engagement, anyway?"

"Because she's in love with Rick, of course," Shirley told him impulsively, and the next moment could have bitten her tongue out. Because, of course, that was the last thing in the world she had meant to say and the last thing she should have said.

"That's—damnable of you, Miss Andrews," Jonny told her through his teeth and she knew that he despised her now. "I don't know just why you wanted to stir up a hornet's nest, but you've done a beautiful job of it. If you don't mind, I think I'd rather not discuss it any further!"

He turned and walked away from her, cold-sober now with shock, furiously angry with Shirley, hating her because he loved Katrina. It is not easy to turn suddenly and sharply against someone you love, though it is easy enough to hurl the blame for the loved one's cruelty in the teeth of someone you don't like.

Shirley stood very still for a moment there in the garden. So Katrina had brought it off! Katrina had maneuvered to break her engagement to Jonny in such a way that she had not only kept Rick, but turned him more surely towards her than ever. Rick's protective instinct, his innate chivalry, was aroused in her defense, and from that to loving her was only a step. A very small step, since Shirley knew that Rick had been more than half in love with Katrina for a long time.

She lifted her shoulders in a little shrug at last and turned back to the house. It was unthinkable that she should stay here under this roof a moment longer than was necessary to gather her possessions together and get out.

By using the side entrance to the house, she reached her room without encountering anyone except a hurrying servant. She had changed from the borrowed frock into her uniform, had swung a cape about her shoulders, and with her packed bag in her hands was about to leave the room when, without the preliminary of a knock, the door opened and Katrina almost danced in, merry-eyed, smugly satisfied, like a cat that has just had the second bowl of Grade-A cream.

She nodded as she saw Shirley's preparations for departure, and said briskly, "Yes, of course. I felt that would be the best

thing and that you'd realize it. I've brought your check. It's drawn, of course, to the end of the month, since you are leaving without notice."

Shirley avoided the extended hand that held a slip of green paper and said curtly, "You can mail a check to the hospital for the length of time I was actually here—or turn it over to your favorite charity."

Katrina said, wide-eyed, innocent, "Why—you're angry!"

Shirley gasped at the sheer audacity of that. "Well, what did you expect—that I'd be pleased and flattered to be made the scapegoat?"

"Oh, now there's really no need of your taking that tone," said Katrina lightly. "After all, it surely doesn't matter to you. Jonny's furious, of course, and thinks you 'lured' him, and Rick thinks Jonny's a so-and-so, and that I couldn't possibly be expected to marry him, and everything's just grand! But why should *you* be upset?"

Shirley stared at her incredulously. "You're fantastic!" she said at last. "It never occurs to you that anybody else should have any feelings at all, does it? You think the world was specially ordained for your private enjoyment and that everybody else should step aside to give you what you want!"

Katrina shrugged pettishly. "Oh, for heaven's sake!" she snapped, dropping the check on the dressing table. "Sorry you're being so stuffy about all this. I came up to thank you and to offer you a reward for getting me out of a mess."

"Thanks, I've had all the reward I can take, for one evening, at least!" said Shirley grimly. "And now if you don't mind—the last ferry for the other side of the lake leaves in a few minutes."

"Oh, the station wagon's waiting to drive you back to the hospital," said Katrina curtly. "I'm very grateful, really. Let me know if you think of anything you'd like in return."

And with a cold, unfriendly look at Shirley, she walked out and shut the door behind her.

Shirley shook her head a little to clear it of conflicting emotions and went down the side stairs and out to the drive where a station wagon with a sleepy chauffeur was waiting.

At the hospital she slipped smoothly back into the old routine. But she despised herself that she could not quite get Rick Chambers' image out of her mind. More important, she couldn't

With her right hand raised, and her eyes on the flag that floated so gallantly in the warm spring breeze, she said clearly and with all the conviction of her earnest heart.

"I, Shirley Andrews, having been appointed a second lieutenant, Army of the United States, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign or domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter. So help me God!"

The gold bar was pinned upon her shoulder; she and the group of fellow nurses similarly adorned stood for a moment, and then were dismissed. It had been a thrilling moment for them all a moment never to be forgotten, no matter what the future might hold, a moment treasured warm in their hearts, beside that moment that now seemed so many years ago when they had received their white caps, symbol of graduation from probationers into full-fledged nurses. Then they had recited another pledge, the Florence Nightingale pledge. Going back to her quarters, the gold bar on her shoulders catching and holding the afternoon sunlight, Shirley repeated the Florence Nightingale pledge in her mind. She would never forget it; it was the creed by which every nurse has charted her course since that day in 1893 when a committee under the chairmanship of Lystra E. Gretter, R.N., had formulated it. The words seemed to sing themselves in Shirley's heart:

I solemnly pledge myself before God and this assembly:

To pass my life in purity and to practice my profession faithfully.

I will abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous, and will not take, or knowingly administer any harmful drug.

I will do all in my power to maintain and elevate the standard of my profession, and will hold in confidence all personal matters committed to my keeping and all family matters coming to my knowledge in the practice of my profession.

With loyalty will I endeavor to aid the physician in his work, and devote myself to the welfare of those committed to my care.

She drew a long breath and unconsciously squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Both the Florence Nightingale

get it out of her heart. And often she lay awake at night, tired to death and needing sleep desperately, but unable to sleep because of the thought of Rick; and no amount of stern argument could do anything towards getting him out of her heart so that she could sleep.

When her orders finally came through, she reacted with an eagerness that left her friends among the other nurses a little puzzled.

"Hi," demanded Mary Paige, puzzled, "I suppose you know what being an Army nurse means, don't you? Wearing Army fatigue clothes; bathing in a tin hat; helping to build hospitals, and then tearing them down within a few hours; working so close to the front line that when you hand a surgeon a scalpel you'll feel the ground shaking under your feet? Working eighteen, twenty-four hours a day, maybe; hiking with a full pack on your back—"

Shirley laughed. "Sure, I've seen the movies and I've seen news-weekly pictures, and I've heard lecturers and all that—but I don't scare worth a cent. I wouldn't miss it for anything in the world! All I ask is—overseas the minute I'm good enough!"

Mary nodded understandingly. "Well, I had a hunch that's the way you'd feel about it, so I applied, too. But darn it, they turned me down!" she confessed.

"Oh, Mary, I'm terribly sorry!"

"Thanks," said Mary gruffly. "Couldn't quite make the physical. That darned operation last year— But, well, carry on for the both of us, and write to me, won't you? Let me know what's going on, if the censors'll let you!"

"Of course darling," said Shirley.

5

Shirley reported to the designated military hospital where she was to receive the four weeks' basic training that would familiarize her with certain customs and traditions of the Army. She worked hard, studied intensely, and at the end of the fourth week, in a group of girls as eager and excited and proud as she was, she stood on the parade ground in the late afternoon, looking trim and very smart in her dress uniform, and took the oath that made her a second lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps.

pledge and her oath as a second lieutenant were challenging. To live up to them, as she had sworn to do, meant hard work and self-sacrifice; but she was not frightened of that thought. She liked the work; it gave her a wonderful feeling to know that she was skilled to help those who were hurt and sick and suffering. She wanted desperately to go overseas into the very thick of fighting, and she knew she would not be afraid!

But for the present, there was work to be done here. Wherever she was assigned, she would do her level best to live up to both the pledge and her oath as a second lieutenant. And when she reached her room in the nurse's quarters, she stood for a moment in front of the small framed page that hung above the little desk and that was headed, "Pledge of the Army Nurse."

As an Army Nurse, I accept the responsibilities of an officer in the Army Nurse Corps.

I shall give faithful care to the men who fight for the freedom of this country and the women who stand behind them.

I shall bring to the American soldier wherever he may be the best of my knowledge and professional skill.

I shall approach him cheerfully at all times under any conditions I may find.

I shall endeavor to maintain the highest nursing standards possible in the performance of my duties.

I shall appear fearless in the presence of danger and quiet the fears of others to the best of my ability.

My only criticism shall be constructive. The reputation and good name of the Army Nurse Corps and of the nursing profession shall be uppermost in my thoughts, second only to the care of my patients.

I shall endeavor to be a credit to my country and to the uniform I wear.

She murmured under her breath, in a tone of the deepest reverence, "So help me God!" Her eyes were misty when she turned away from the framed page, and she looked into the small mirror, her fingers touching gently, almost caressingly, the golden bar on her shoulders, the gold caduceus on her collar, with its large "N" to distinguish it from that worn by the doctors.

And it seemed to her as she stood there in the spotless, austere

little room that to be an Army nurse, in the service of her country in wartime, was a pretty wonderful thing.

She knew, of course, that there must be a period of service in a military hospital in this country before she could hope for duty in a battle area, and when, a few days later, she was assigned to a vast hospital in the Middle West, she went eagerly and joyously. This was another step towards the overseas job towards which every eligible nurse strained eagerly.

The hospital, connected with an Army base, was like a small world to itself. The hospital building was new, still in part under construction, and the nurses' quarters were so recently completed that the smell of pine boards and fresh paint still hung in the air.

Shirley had arrived with a contingent of four other girls and they were greeted with obvious delight by the entire staff. There was much work to be done; men were being brought in from overseas, and there were sick and those hurt in accidents at the base, as well. There was also a maternity ward where the wives and children of servicemen might receive attention. Shirley plunged into her job with a deep joy in service that made both patients and doctor quickly aware of her.

The work was not especially hard, she found. She had worked harder, and longer hours back at St. Christopher's. And at St. Christopher's, her patients had been harder to please. Here, the very fact that they asked so little of her, and were almost always apologetic for "bothering" her, made her eyes sting a little.

Especially the men who had been wounded, or had become ill overseas were uncomplaining, patient, appreciative. She felt sometimes that she would like to kneel beside the narrow beds on which they lay and weep over them; but she knew that nothing could offend them more, or make them more fiercely uncomfortable. She adopted a gay, cheerful note always; she scolded them with mock sternness, when there was a lump in her throat because of unshed tears. The fact that their eyes turned towards her gratefully when they heard her voice was something to treasure.

Like many of the other younger nurses she liked working on Maternity. Some of the girls who came in to have their babies, big-eyed and excited and self-important, were so pathetically young that Shirley felt a sort of rage that life should be so complicated for youngsters who should be finishing the

third grade at high school, worrying about saddle shoes and "formals" and movie allowances.

Late one afternoon when she was on Maternity, a medical corpsman came to her, looking a little worried.

"Sorry to bother you, Lieutenant, but that little kid in 6 is going to hurt herself if she don't stop crying," he explained anxiously.

"I'll have a look at her, Sergeant," said Shirley and hurried away.

The covers of the bed in Ward 6, equipped to care for eight cases awaiting admission to Delivery, were crumpled over the head of the patient who lay there. There was not a sound, but now and then the covers above the shoulders stirred a little.

"Here, here, here," scolded Shirley in her gayest voice, as a gentle hand stripped the covers from a tumbled golden head, and a childish, tear-stained face was lifted to look at her. "What's all this nonsense? Do you want a spanking? You'll get one, if you keep this up!"

"I'm—I'm—scared, Nurse," whispered the girl, who couldn't have been a day over seventeen. "I—I—don't think I want a baby after all."

Shirley laughed at her. "Well, it's a little late to be thinking that! I'd say within another three or four hours, at most, you're going to have one!" she teased and saw a tiny gleam of mirth in the girl's frightened blue eyes. "Besides, what's there to be scared of? We've very fine doctors here, and we're all crazy about babies; in a week, you'll wonder how you could ever have been scared."

"I'm not scared—I mean, not that way," the girl answered, and went on breathlessly, "but what am I going to *do* with a baby? I don't know anything about taking care of them. Of course, I'm crazy about them, but formulas, and baths and cod-liver oil. There are so many things you have to do for a baby."

"You little goose!" derided Shirley. "Don't you know you haven't a ghost of a chance of getting out of this place until you know all about how to take care of a baby? What else do you suppose we nurses are for, but to teach you how to take care of your baby before you leave here?"

A look of vast relief spread over the girl's white face and some of the shadow vanished from her blue eyes.

"Gee, you're swell, Lieutenant," she sighed, and then after a moment her eyes clouded again. "But after I leave the hospital,

what'll I do with a baby? Nobody will rent you a room in this town if you've got a baby. I had to lie like the dickens when I rented a room here in town before Jimmy went overseas. I had to swear I wasn't going to have a baby. And when I left to come to the hospital this morning my landlady said I couldn't come back unless I left the baby somewhere. She said she couldn't have a squawling young-'un bothering her other roomers."

Quick anger flared in Shirley's heart, but she kept it out of her eyes, and out of her voice, and said soothingly, if rashly, "Well, don't you worry about that, either. We'll have lots of time to plan something there too! So don't you worry about a thing—except having a fine husky baby to grow up in this country we are all hoping to make a pretty fine place for babies to grow up in!"

A spasm of pain convulsed the girl's face and she clung to Shirley's hand so tightly that her nails bit deeply into Shirley's flesh. But Shirley held on, and smiled warmly, comfortingly, at the girl, until the pain and flicker of fear faded from her eyes.

"That was a honey," whispered the girl after a moment. Her smile was pallid, but so full of courage that Shirley's heart went out to her more fully than ever. "It won't be long, now!"

Shirley murmured soothing things, bathing the white, perspiration-drenched face, watching her with wise experienced eyes. And when the time came, she saw the girl off to the Delivery Room, holding her hand warmly until the nurse from the Delivery Room took over, saying briskly to the girl, "I suppose, of course, you've ordered a boy?"

The girl tried to smile, the ghost of panic still faintly visible in her eyes, and said with a courage before which the two nurses mentally doffed their hats, "Oh, sure—but of course, if the supply of boys is scanty we'll take what we get and be crazy about it!"

Shirley went back to her own ward, but she could not quite get the picture of that young, valiant face out of her mind. These kids! The boys of eighteen, nineteen, twenty—their wives back here at home, some of them sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—facing the battle of death, and the battle of life; what a weird, mixed-up sort of world it was when children went out to fight, while other children stayed home and bore their children, to replenish an earth devastated by war!

Going off duty that evening, she paused at Maternity and the

nurse nodded. "A bouncing boy," she murmured as they stood together and looked at the bed where the golden-haired child was sleeping, her face white as the pillow on which she lay.

"Was it very bad?" asked Shirley softly.

The nurse lifted her shoulders in a tiny shrug and said soberly, "It wasn't too easy, but she's got what it takes, that youngster! They all have, though, bless their hearts! *Lord!* When I look at what's being brought back to us from the battle fronts, and what's being sent over, and then these kids here! If I could get my hands on that Hitler for one single moment!"

Shirley nodded, her own pretty face twisted into an expression that matched that of the other nurse. But there was so much to be said and so few words in which to put it, that after a moment she went on back to her quarters.

Throughout her busy day, she could not forget that golden-haired child. Late the following afternoon, she stopped in to see her again. The girl lay with a small, carefully wrapped bundle held protectingly against her, and there was a look of awed wonder in the blue eyes she lifted to Shirley's.

"Isn't he beautiful, Lieutenant?" she whispered, and Shirley thought of a child on Christmas morning to whom Santa Claus has been unbelievably good. "And I won't have to learn about formulas and things—on account of I'm healthy and strong and I can nurse him myself. Isn't that simply super?"

"He's a lucky little guy," answered Shirley, noting with a warmly approving eye the beautifully shaped little head, the strong little limbs. He was a fine healthy baby and she knew he and his mother were going to have a grand time together.

But what on earth, she wondered as she went about her duties, was the girl to do if she could not rent a room where she could have her baby with her? The record indicated that she was Annie May Russell, her husband a private first class, in the Pacific War Theater; she was listed as an orphan and it was obvious that she had no place to go, or she would not have stayed on in the little town near the camp after her husband had left.

Shirley knew that the girl faced a situation that was painfully familiar to service wives with babies all over the country; but just knowing that it was a deplorable state of affairs, and that landlords should be ashamed to refuse shelter to these youngsters and their babies didn't help to solve the situation.

She couldn't just dismiss it with a worried realization that it

was all a part of war conditions; she had promised Annie May that when she was ready to leave the hospital, there would be a place for her to stay where she could keep her baby with her. Shirley knew she had left herself in for something that was going to be pretty difficult to accomplish. But at least she had a few days in which to puzzle it out; Annie May, if all went well, would be at the hospital ten days. And in ten days, she, Lieutenant Shirley Andrews of the Army Nurse Corps, was going to have to accomplish something in the nature of a miracle, and she might as well face it!

6

Among the patients on Shirley's ward was one Sergeant Timothy Trimble, who had lost a leg and who had acquired a number of distressful wounds—along with several medals, including the Purple Heart. He was very quiet. His appreciation of any small effort towards making him more comfortable was received with courteous appreciation, but he rarely asked for anything, and he never smiled.

Shirley saw the bleak tragedy in his dark eyes. She watched his face, unobtrusively, when mail was distributed in the mornings. She saw that he received mail, but she never saw him read one of the thick letters that were addressed in a dashing feminine hand. Once, in remaking his bed, she found a sheaf of them hidden under his pillow, and was surprised to see that not one of them had been opened.

He saw the sheaf of envelopes in her hand and with his uninjured hand he all but lunged at them, and gripped them tightly.

"Sorry, soldier," said Shirley gently. "I wanted to make your bed fresh, so you'll be more comfortable."

"I'm quite all right, Lieutenant—thanks," he said almost brusquely. "Your aide made it for me a little while ago."

Shirley hesitated just a moment. "Your letters haven't been opened. Trouble with your eyes? Shall I read them for you?"

"No!" The man's voice was savage, and after a moment he made himself say quietly, "Sorry, Lieutenant. I just didn't want to read them. There's nothing the matter with my eyes, even if all the rest of me is pretty well battered up."

"I'm sorry," said Shirley quietly. "I wasn't prying. If there's anything we can do, you'll let us, won't you?"

"Oh—sure, sure, sure—thanks," said Sergeant Trimble and turned his head away so that he faced the wall.

Shirley went on with her work, knowing by long experience that the kindest thing she could do was to leave the man to fight out his own private hell alone. When the time came that she or anyone else could do anything for him, they would be told. Until then, the only thing to do was leave him alone, in what pretended privacy he was able to secure in his own thoughts.

Leaving the ward on her way to lunch, while several Nurse's Aides served the patients, she came face to face with a girl who was just entering the building. The girl was young, eighteen or nineteen; she was beautifully dressed in a crisp frock of pale silk lightly sprinkled with tiny nosegays of field flowers. She wore a wide-brimmed hat, and spotless white slippers, and if her stockings were not nylons, then they were an excellent substitute. Tucked under her arm was a large envelope purse of scarlet leather, a bright exclamation point to the sentence of her beauty and her daintiness.

"Oh, Nurse—I beg your pardon, you're a Lieutenant, aren't you?" said the girl in pretty confusion, her dark eyes anxious, her faintly suntanned skin touched with color. "Could you tell me where I'll find Sergeant Timothy Trimble? They told me at the office that he was in this building."

Shirley caught her breath and looked at the girl again. Very lovely, she was, and obviously her clothes were expensive, exquisitely simple, expensively just right for a summer day. There was breeding and distinction in every line of her body. So *this* was what was troubling Sergeant Trimble! The lost leg, the various incapacitating wounds—and this exquisite child!

"Are you a relative?" asked Shirley politely.

The color deepened in the girl's face, and she tilted her head a little, proudly, as she said quietly, "I hope to be—by marriage! I wanted to marry him before he went overseas, but he wouldn't have it! And now that he's back, and he's been—hurt, he's trying to pretend he doesn't love me any more. He won't answer my letters and— Well, I've come to have it out with him."

Shirley hesitated for a moment and then she asked gently, "Have you any idea of the—extent of his injuries?"

The color drained from the girl's face, but she did not drop her eyes. She had courage, Shirley saw and approved.

"Only that—it's pretty bad," she answered faintly. "But I'm not frightened."

"He's lost a leg," said Shirley with merciful, brutal brevity.

The girl caught her breath and set her teeth hard in her lower lip and for a moment she was rigid and still, as if carved out of stone. But then she breathed deeply and her hands unclenced, and she said levelly, "And—?"

"And the other wounds will heal and leave him none the worse eventually, though it will be a long road of convalescence."

"He's—not—blind?" whispered the girl, as though she could think of no greater horror.

"Of course not!" answered Shirley hearteningly.

The girl drew a long breath and the color came back to her cheeks as she said, "You see, when he wouldn't answer my letters, I was afraid—maybe that was why! To be blind seems to me the most awful thing of all. It would be to him, too, because he was studying art and his work was very promising."

Shirley said quickly, "His hands are uninjured, and his eyes are fine. There's no reason why he can't go on studying art later."

The girl was radiant. "May I see him?" she begged.

Shirley hesitated. "You won't weep over him or—upset him?"

The girl stiffened with resentment. "Do I look like a complete fool?" she asked hotly.

"Sorry," said Shirley, and smiled at her. "Come along."

She led the way back to the ward where an aide was just placing a tray before Sergeant Trimble. He was looking at it with a lack of interest that was almost acute distaste, as Shirley came around the head of the bed into his range of vision. She bent to lift the tray and said quietly, "I've brought you a visitor, Sergeant. You won't want to be bothered with this now."

As she lifted the tray and straightened, she nodded at the girl, who moved around the bed until she stood before Sergeant Trimble's astounded, unbelieving eyes. For a space that seemed to Shirley a matter of moments, the two merely looked at each other, and then the girl grinned a gay little gamine grin that tried desperately to mock the tears that stood in her dark eyes.

"Hello!" she said crisply, her voice shaking with the smallest possible tremor. "Remember me? The girl you left behind you—

who wouldn't stay there? I trailed you half over the country before you went overseas, and now that you're back again, you might as well get set for more of the same. I'm a persistent sort of gal—remember? I always get my man."

"Louise!" said Sergeant Trimble and put a shaking hand to his face as though quite sure that when he passed it over his eyes and opened them again she would be gone. "What—what are you doing here?" he whispered at last. Shirley made a little involuntary step towards him, fearful of the effect of this shock upon him.

"I told you," said Louise grimly. "You wouldn't write to me, you wouldn't answer my letters, you wouldn't telephone me—and if you think for a moment that you're going to brush me off after I've waited for you this long, you've got another thing coming. I've come to marry you, and you might as well get used to the idea."

Sergeant Trimble had himself somewhat under control by now, and there was a grimace that was almost ugly on his thin-lipped, taut mouth.

"Forgetting something, aren't you, Louise? Or hadn't you noticed?" he asked dryly, and one hand indicated the place where his left leg should have been.

Louise glanced carelessly in the direction indicated. Shirley held her breath, not quite sure that it would be safe for her to leave her patient at this moment.

"So you've lost a leg?" said Louise. Shirley could have hugged her for the cool, casual tone that implied the loss of leg was about as important as the loss of a spring hat in a windstorm. "So what? The government will give you another—and first thing you know, you'll forget you didn't grow it yourself! What's that got to do with the fact that you think you aren't going to marry me?"

Sergeant Trimble stared at her, stunned by her reaction to the thing he had felt so sure would send her, shocked and horrified, away from him.

"You—you mean you—don't mind?" he asked cautiously, as though needing assurance desperately and yet fearful of asking it.

Here again Shirley held her breath. So much depended on the words, the tone of voice, the expression; here in this breathless moment so much hung in the balance. It was for Louise to say which way it would swing: health and a normal life, or depression and bitterness and soul-sickness.

"Of course I mind," said Louise honestly. "Who wouldn't? But after all, married men with wives and families have no business out playing football, and that's about the only thing you'll have to give up! And I'm so darned glad that it wasn't—your eyes—or your hands, because now you can go on being an artist and get yourself famous, so I can have elegant little salons and be a patroness of the arts."

Shirley could have hugged her again. She was so honest, so forthright, so completely right! The boy's bitterly keen eyes, his ears that were sharply attuned to the voice of the heart rather than of the mind, would have detected the tiniest false note. As it was, he gave a little delighted yelp of a laugh and his eyes were filled with tenderness as he put out his hand and caught hers.

Louise blinked and looked uncertainly at Shirley. "Would it be all right if I kissed him now?" she asked humbly. "I mean—it—it wouldn't—shock him or send his temperature up or anything?"

Shirley said swiftly, "I think it would do him more good than anything that could possibly happen to him!"

"Thanks, Lieutenant—so do I!" said Sergeant Trimble firmly. His hand drew Louise down to him, and his arms went about her, and for a moment they clung together like frightened children rescued from some hideous darkness.

Shirley was turning away when Louise said hastily, "Wait a minute, Lieutenant. You heard him, didn't you? You're a witness! He did ask me to marry him, didn't he?"

"I did not!" protested Sergeant Trimble. "Don't go getting ideas! I won't marry you—"

"Oh, yes, you will," said Louise, standing over him, her small white-gloved fists doubled menacingly. "You'll marry me, and *like* it!"

And Shirley, knowing there was no further need for her services here, laughed and went out. It gave her a feeling of exaltation to think of the scene which she had just witnessed. The way Louise had measured up to the ordeal of seeing the man she loved, shattered and broken, made Shirley feel enormously proud. That scene was going to be duplicated over and over and over again in the months to come. It was going to take a tremendous amount of courage and love and understanding for the women who had stayed at home to welcome their men again and to help them to readjustment to the life

at home, men who came home spiritually sick. It was all going to be such a heartbreaking business. But there were girls like Louise, who, led by the love in their hearts, would know instinctively exactly what must be done, and whose love would give them courage to do it. It wasn't going to be easy, but it had to be done, and it would be done. Shirley sighed at the thought of what it was going to mean in the years to come. It seemed to her that the major problem in the "brave new world" that people were discussing so endlessly, was going to be the problem of rehabilitating the returning service men and women, not to new jobs, but to the old loves and the old homes and the old life.

Coming on duty a day or two later, she found Louise waiting in the reception room, cool and immaculate in a corn-yellow linen frock, a wide, shady hat carried in her hand, a purse of leaf-green tucked under her arm.

"They threw me out," she announced cheerfully, when she had greeted Shirley eagerly. "The doctor and a swarm of lesser satellites were making the rounds of the ward and so I was turned out."

Impulsively, Shirley said, "I have to stop in at Maternity for a moment. Want to come along and see the new babes? The crop is very fine!"

Ward 6 was quiet, in the lovely quiet that follows breakfast, baths, and Baby's first visit with his mother. Louise was radiant with delight as Shirley presented her to eager, excited young mothers who boasted of their babies, as is the way with mothers all over the world.

Annie May Russell smiled shyly at Louise, and Shirley left them for a moment while she did her errand. When she came back, Louise was sitting beside the bed, admiring with bated breath the rosy perfection of Gary Russell, Junior.

"It will be fifteen or twenty minutes before you can come in to see Sergeant Trimble, Miss Lowrens," said Shirley. "Would you like to wait here?"

"If Annie May doesn't mind?"

"Of course not. I'd love to have you," said Annie May happily.

And as Shirley went away, she was a bit thoughtful about these two. They were so near the same age; Annie May's chart showed her as little past her seventeenth birthday and Louise was just past her eighteenth. Shirley had learned that Louise

was the only child of wealthy parents, who were arriving in town this afternoon. Louise had admitted that she had left home without telling her parents where she was going or why, but that she had wired them as soon as she was sure they couldn't stop her.

Shirley had listened to Sergeant Trimble during a sleepless interval, when he had needed badly to talk to someone who was interested and sympathetic. And one of the first things an Army nurse learns is that it is just as important to ease a soldier's mind as his body. She had let Sergeant Trimble tell her of meeting Louise at a canteen in her home town when he had been stationed at a nearby camp. He knew, of course, that it would take something like a world war to bridge the social gap between himself, a penniless and determined art student who waited tables in an all-night cafe to get food and money enough to pay for his lessons and for his dingy room, and a girl like Louise, whose father was worth half a million dollars.

The Lowrens had been none too pleased, he admitted (and added, "Who can blame 'em?") when they discovered that Louise "fancied" herself in love with Sergeant Trimble. They had been decent about it; they had told him quite frankly that while they admired him for the battle he was making to establish himself, they felt that his background and Louise's were so vastly different that not even being terribly in love with each other would bridge it with any hope of future happiness. He had agreed with them; and Louise had felt that he had let her down shamefully.

She had fought valiantly and furiously for their right to love each other. Had fought him as well as her mother and father. Oh, sure, he was crazy about her from the start. How could he help it? Wasn't she the sweetest, the loveliest thing that ever walked? But what could a fellow like *him* offer a girl like Louise Lowrens? It didn't make sense!

But she hadn't given up. And in the end, convinced that it meant her happiness, her father and mother had withdrawn their objections to the marriage, although Sergeant Trimble knew that this was only outward and that in their hearts they were as bitterly opposed as ever. And, again he added with every wish to be fair, "Who could blame 'em?"

Louise had wanted to be married before he went overseas. Her parents had consented, but he, Sergeant Trimble, had held that that was the one thing he would not do. And in spite of

all her pleas, he had held out against her. And now, coming home, all banged up, the crazy little darling was still determined—

He had grinned at Shirley when he had finished and there had been something very like reverence in his eyes when he mentioned Louise, and asked in a tone of wonder and tenderness, "What can you do with a youngster like that, Lieutenant?"

"Well, you could marry her," said Shirley firmly.

Sergeant Trimble protested, "But I've just been trying to tell you, trying to show you, it wouldn't work, Lieutenant. It doesn't make sense."

"Love seldom does, but in this case, I don't see why it wouldn't! The girl loves you, she's made that plain; you adore her, you have made *that* plain! After all, when there is enough love between two people, a marriage has to be a success."

Sergeant Trimble was listening to her with the almost desperate eagerness that told her how much he wanted to believe her. And Shirley, smiling at him warmly, said, "Think it over Sergeant—think it over!"

"I will, Lieutenant—thanks," said the boy huskily, and Shirley went on with her rounds, knowing that the wisest, the kindest thing was to let him work out his decision by himself, in quiet thought. As much quiet thought, that is, as his love for Louise made possible.

At moments like this, the memory of Rick Chambers came back to her with such a poignant strength that she had to set her teeth hard to fight down the wave of longing and hopeless regret. It was hard, at such a time, to remember the "Old Lady" and her calm, sure counsel—"It's an experience. Profit by it!" But that had long ago become a lodestone of her life and now she gripped the thought firmly and tried desperately to forget a man's brown, handsome face, eyes that had twinkled with good humor, but that grew cold and hostile with loathing. She had not tried to explain to him that night. What possible explanation could she have offered that he would have accepted, in the face of Katrina's clever pretense of heartbreak and shock? Oh, Katrina was clever, Shirley reminded herself grimly, as she made herself go on with her work.

7

The result of Sergeant Trimble's "thinking it over" was attested one afternoon a few days later when Louise stood beside his bed, a slim, exquisitely dainty figure in a soft, white, beautifully tailored frock, a wide-brimmed white hat shading her lovely, excited face, a white and gold prayer book holding a single white orchid in one hand, her other hand tucked warmly into Sergeant Trimble's firm grip.

Just back of Louise stood her father and mother. Middle-aged, well-dressed, well-bred, Mrs. Lowrens looked a little frightened, her eyes red, but with a valiant smile on her face.

Shirley stood at the foot of the bed, beside her two of the doctors on duty in the ward. Several orderlies, medical corpsmen, and the other patients in the ward were additional witnesses, wide-eyed and pleased at this break in the humdrum of their days, while the chaplain who held a well-worn prayer book in his hand read the marriage service.

Shirley knew that she would never forget the radiant look of the girl in white, the courage and the steadfast love and undying faith in her dark eyes; nor would she ever forget the face of the boy who lay against his pillows. He had the look of one who has been down into hell but who has come back again, and before whose eyes the very gates of Paradise are swinging open.

When the benediction had been pronounced, Louise bent with a lovely, graceful gesture and set her young mouth against Sergeant Trimble's. As she straightened, she said radiantly, "Well, Mother, Dad, meet my husband!"

Though her voice was low-pitched, not quite steady, there was something like the ringing of soft bells in it. She stood for a moment, almost as though startled at the sound of the words, and then she repeated them, barely above a whisper, savoring the loveliness of their implication, "My *husband!*"

She looked swiftly about the little group and her voice shook as she cried in a tone of wonder, "But—that's beautiful! I never knew that just 'husband' was such a beautiful word! Maybe it's because I never thought I could call Tim 'my husband'!"

She looked down at him and there was tender mirth in her eyes and in her voice as she accused him, "Thought you'd get away from me, didn't you? I tried to tell you a long time ago it wouldn't do you any good to try to run from me—that I always get my man!"

"Louise, don't be shameless!" protested her mother, a little scandalized, tenderly amused, looking swiftly about the little group, as though anxious that they should not misjudge her daughter's frankness.

And then the door of the ward opened and four grinning orderlies came in, wheeling between them what looked like a tea-cart, but probably wasn't at all, beneath the long, shining folds of the damask cloth that covered it. Perched on the cart there was a huge and handsome wedding cake, complete to the tiny bride and groom dolls that stood beneath a pink sugar bell.

"Oh, Dad—you sweet thing!" stammered Louise, and for a moment tears shook in her voice.

"I questioned the doctors. They assured me there was nobody in this ward who'd be any the worse for a bit of wedding cake," her father hastily explained, beaming with happiness that reflected from his daughter's eager delight.

Louise cut the cake, and went about the ward serving it, with a warm smile and an eager word to all the patients, who accepted the cake, and offered sincere congratulations and good wishes.

All in all, Shirley told herself as she slipped away a little later, it was as lovely a wedding as anyone could possibly want; she was quite sure that if it had been held beneath the vaulted dome of some great cathedral, with a choir singing "The Voice That Breathed O'er Eden," and a bishop to read the service, and sixteen bridesmaids in pastel-colored cobwebs of frocks, it would not have been a wedding to be more tenderly remembered by the bride and groom. They had shared their wedding with the others in the ward, many of them boys facing the same problem that Sergeant Trimble had had to face: Was some girl's love strong enough to be able to take a lover who had lost an arm or a leg or worse? Perhaps the wedding would be an inspiration that would help some of the others decide. Anyway, it had been beautiful and Shirley felt quite sure in her own heart that Louise and Sergeant Trimble would

make it a successful marriage. They had love and courage and tenderness.

As she went down the corridor, passing the Maternity Ward, a Nurse's Aide said urgently, "Lieutenant, if you have time, one of the patients on Maternity wants to see you."

Shirley thanked her and turned into the ward. Of course it was Annie May, who was sitting propped up against her pillows, about to yield, with obvious reluctance, her small son replete with his current feeding, to the white-masked nurse who was bending above her.

"Maybe he isn't the most beautiful baby in the world," Annie May was admitting reluctantly as the nurse's competent arms curved protectingly about the drowsy baby, "but you'll have one heck of a time convincing me he isn't!"

"And who'd try to convince you?" demanded the nurse, smiling at her above the baby's dark fluff of silken hair. "Of course he's the most beautiful baby in the world. This room is full of the most beautiful babies in the world. Any maternity ward is!"

Annie May grinned and said, "Oh well, anyway *I* think he's super!"

"You'd better! We have severe penalties here for mothers who don't think their babies are super!" warned the nurse darkly, and went away with the small bundle held protectingly in her arms.

Annie May turned to see Shirley standing at the foot of her bed and cried eagerly, "Oh, Lieutenant Andrews, I've been having fits to see you! Gosh, you can't think what a perfectly swell thing has happened—and we owe it all to you. I'll never be able to tell you how grateful I am! Just think! Three of us are going to be able to leave here and take our babies with us and have a real house to live in and a backyard for sandpiles for the babies, and— Gosh, isn't it *super?"*

Shirley blinked. "Wait a minute—you're going too fast for me," she protested. "Start all over again at the beginning and tell me all about it—and take your time or you'll explode!"

Annie May's laugh was childish and gay. "I know it. I feel like exploding. I feel like jumping out of bed and turning somersaults all over the place—I'm *that* excited!"

"Well, let's hear about it, and let's postpone the somersaults, shall we?" suggested Shirley, with a gleam of teasing humor in her eyes.

"Of course," beamed Annie May. "Well, you see, you brought Louise—Miss Lowrens—in to meet me, and she—Well, she's swell! We all liked her, and she used to come early for her visit with her boy friend, and visit with us while she waited for the doctors to get through with him. And we all talked and she found out that Polly Mason and Janie Cooper and I wouldn't be able to take our babies back with us to the furnished rooms we've been living in on account of our landlady doesn't like her house cluttered up with babies!"

She paused for breath and Shirley waited, a little constriction of pity at her heart for these young, brash children who had been so suddenly and so brutally catapulted, by the gods of war, into the solution of problems beyond their years.

"Well, Louise didn't say anything until this morning," Annie May rushed on eagerly. "And then she brought her mother and father in to meet us—gosh, they're swell people!—and then she told us that she would be staying here as long as her boy friend is in the hospital, and that she had been looking for a place and not finding one, because the town's jam-packed. So her father had found a house for sale, and he had bought it and given her the deed as a wedding present. And it's got *four* bedrooms, and an attic that can be made into a nursery, and she can't live there all alone, so she's asked Polly and Janie and me to share the house with her! Isn't that simply *gorgeous?*"

Shirley said sincerely, "Well, it certainly is! I never heard of anything so perfect!"

Annie May studied her for a long moment, and some of her breathless gaiety and excitement faded as she said more soberly, "Of course, Lieutenant, I know you sort of planned the whole thing."

"For goodness' sake, I did nothing of the sort!"

Annie May said firmly, "Well, maybe not the details. But I bet when you brought her in here to meet us, you thought something might come of it."

"I knew that she was very much in love with Sergeant Trimble and that it's likely he will be here for quite some time, months probably, and that she would want to be where she could see him every day."

"And you knew her folks were rich and they'd see to it she had a decent place to stay, and you knew she was too warm-

hearted and generous to want to have a whole place all to herself."

Shirley smiled. "Well, she couldn't live by herself in a whole big house, and I think it's a perfectly wonderful plan. Now you quiet down and get some sleep or we won't let you leave here day after tomorrow as we'd planned."

Annie May heaved a sigh of pure happiness. "Oh, I can sleep now!" she said and her voice was a warm little murmur of heavenly peace of mind. "I've been worried sick."

"After I promised you I'd do something?" Shirley scolded gently.

Annie May's hand touched hers in a shy caress and was gone. "Oh, sure, I knew you'd do something if you could, but getting a room for a girl *and* a baby is plenty tough in any Army town! I've heard other girls talk and I've had some experience myself. People don't want to rent to service wives, because they know that they'll only stay as long as their husbands are in camp."

"Well, everything's fine now, so you haven't anything to worry about, except to get a lot of sleep and learn to take care of that fine big boy of yours."

"Oh, sure," said Annie May, and Shirley went out, taking with her the memory of the girl's radiant face and shining eyes.

Shirley and a group of friends she had made among the nurses had decided that it would be a welcome break in the monotony of life in quarters to have dinner that night at the Officers' Club.

They arrived at the club looking very smart and trim in their beige off-duty dresses. There were a number of young officers from various outfits. Shirley and her friends were popular. They danced to the music of a "juke" box and had a gay evening.

But back in bed in quarters, Shirley found herself remembering, not the fun of dinner and dancing at the Officers' Club, not the beautiful, poignant wedding ceremony in the ward that afternoon, or even the ecstatic relief of Annie May at discovering that she was to share a house with Louise and the others. Instead she was thinking of Rick Chambers, hearing his voice, remembering, with a little sick twinge, the expression in his eyes there in the moon-silvered garden when he

had looked accusingly at her, fresh from being kissed by Jonny Derwent.

She turned her pillow over, tried to thump it into a shape more conducive to slumber, and told herself the reason her memory was so active tonight was that the moonlight was so bright and white. The moon rode high, a huge round platter of mellow gold, spilling a little on the town that lay white and still, broken by the thick dark shadows of the buildings and by the small but ambitious trees that had been planted in this almost desert place in the hope of softening too harsh outlines of too new buildings. The night Jonny Derwent had kissed her, and Rick and Katrina had caught them, had been just such a night as this; and she supposed, miserably, that the silvery beauty of any night of full moon would bring back to her, with painful vividness, memory of that night. She had known with one look into Rick's dark eyes that any faint hope she had ever had that he might like her—she had never dared, in her wildest moments to hope that he might *love* her!—had vanished.

She knew she was a fool to care so deeply for a man she had known so briefly, a man who had scarcely noticed her until he had begun to hate and despise her! She was not only a fool, she told herself furiously, turning her pillow once more with an indignant thump, she was as stubborn and as contrary as a Missouri mule to go on even *remembering* the man!

8

Shirley was nearing the end of her six months of service in the military hospital, when one morning the head of staff sent for her.

She searched her memory frantically in the uneasy wonder as to whether she had committed any breach of hospital or military etiquette; she couldn't remember any. She had been doing her work acceptably, she knew. Surely there was no reason why she should be summoned by the head for a call-down. But a summons to the head was not lightly received, and so she saw to it that her uniform was immaculately fresh and crisp, her hair neat, and her cap set at exactly the angle most

approved in military circles; and with an air of outward calm that was far removed from her inner trepidation, she presented herself at the office in the Administration Building where the medical commanding officer was to be seen.

A Wac seated at a typewriter smiled at her and said, "Colonel Marbury will see you in just a moment, Lieutenant."

Shirley thanked her and sat down. A moment later the door opened, two captains came out wrangling amicably and hurried away, and the Wac said, "You may go in, Lieutenant."

Shirley advanced into the room at the required distance, stopped, saluted smartly, and said, "Lieutenant Andrews reporting, sir."

Colonel Marbury was a burly, middle-aged man who had gone through World War I. He was a man known and admired, respected if not loved, for his genuine ability as a medical officer; he was a stickler for detail, stern and unrelenting in his insistence that a high standard be maintained throughout the hospital. But he proved now that he could relax and be an amiable man, as well.

"Ah, yes, Lieutenant—sit down," he suggested pleasantly, and Shirley was grateful for the permission. As she sat down she saw a folder on Colonel Marbury's desk, with her name and rank written across it!

Colonel Marbury opened the folder and glanced at the papers it held. Shirley realized uneasily that they were her own papers, that had admitted her into the Army Nurse Corps, and to this hospital.

"I see by the record, Lieutenant, that your period of service with us will be ending soon," said the Colonel. "And I also see that you have applied for overseas duty as soon as you are eligible."

"Yes, sir," said Shirley and hoped that he did not see how tightly her hands were gripped together in her lap.

Colonel Marbury smiled at her, a smile that made him seem years younger and not at all terrifying.

"You're a fine nurse, Lieutenant. We're proud of you." He stated the fact as though knowing that nothing else could have relieved her tension as quickly or as completely. He smiled at her again as she relaxed a little and asked, "Make you feel better?"

"Ever so much better, thank you, sir!" she admitted, smiling shyly.

"I know. One of the penalties of being a C.O. is that you can never ask someone to drop in for a friendly visit without scaring the daylights out of them," he complained humorously. "But please get that idea out of your mind. You're a fine nurse, and you've done a good job, and we'll hate to lose you. But of course, we can't hope to hold you here when you are so desperately needed overseas!"

"Thank you, sir," said Shirley warmly and sincerely.

Colonel Marbury was silent for a moment and then he said quietly, "Know anything about flying, Lieutenant?"

Puzzled, she said, "I've flown a few times—that's all."

"Get air-sick?"

"Oh, no, I loved it," she answered quickly.

He hesitated again and then he said, "I am merely making a suggestion, Lieutenant. Please understand that! I know a branch of the nursing service that needs nurses pretty badly, but they must be volunteers. This is so new a branch that few even of the Army nurses have heard about it. Matter of fact, it is more or less experimental, but we feel so sure that it is going to be of such terrific importance, that, with the first group of nurses about to be graduated and sent into action, another group is being gathered for the second schooling. Some of us at various hospitals over the country have been asked to recommend eligible nurses we feel will be of value. I've looked up your record, and if you'd care to volunteer, we would be glad here to do whatever we can to help you. But mind you, if you don't feel a strong desire to volunteer—if you'd rather have another branch of the nursing service—it's strictly up to you. But the Air Evacuation Service is pretty important."

"The Air Evacuation Service, sir?" she repeated eagerly.

"Evacuating the wounded from combat zones to hospitals back of the line, by plane," answered Colonel Marbury. "It's dangerous work, but—"

He picked up a large brown envelope and held it out to her.

"You'll find data here that will help you make up your mind," he finished, smiling. "And anything we can do to help you—"

"I don't think I need to make up my mind. It sounds exactly what I'd like," said Shirley eagerly.

"Good girl! Two or three other nurses from here are volunteering. I don't know how many of you, or if any of you, will be accepted. But—good luck to you all!"

He held out his hand and, pleased and excited, Shirley put her own in it. He gave her a firm, pleasant handshake, she stepped backward, saluted and went quickly out.

For the rest of that day and long into the evening, she thought of the things she had read in the folder, and the night mail carried her application for training in the Air Evacuation Service. For the next week or ten days, she scarcely dared look at the mail that came to her, for fear the acceptance of her application would not be among it. But at last it came; she and another girl were accepted and ordered to report for training to Bowman Field, Kentucky.

Louise Trimble, who had moved into the shabby but comfortable old house purchased for her by her father, heard the news of Shirley's appointment and insisted that she come to dinner at what she cheerfully called the "Henhouse." There Shirley found Annie May, Polly Mason, and Janie Cooper, sharing the house with Louise, like a group of sorority sisters on a college campus—except that sorority houses are seldom disturbed by the imperious wailing of young babies!

They showed her eagerly over the house. They laughed with youth's own poignant gaiety at the makeshifts, the little inconveniences, and the difficulties of managing on the allotments sent them by their young husbands.

When dinner was ready, and they were all seated at the big old-fashioned dinner table, an enormously stout Negro woman in a neat print dress and a vast white apron came in to serve the meal. Louise smiled at her warmly and said, "Lieutenant Andrews, meet our boss! This is Mattie. She runs us and the house."

"How you do, ma'am?" said Mattie, completely undisturbed by Louise's gay taunt. "Somebody had to run dese hyeh chillen, ma'am. Miss Louise's maw sho' ain' gwine 'way and leave her chile hyeh by he'self—no' yet wid dese other chillen."

"I don't blame her," said Shirley. She felt many years older than these valiant little girls who were playing at being grown-up and mothers of fine, healthy babies.

"Whut you think, ma'am, 'bout li'l kids lak' dese wid babies an' a house and husbands what ain't never even seed dey babies?" demanded Mattie, and out of her tired old eyes Shirley saw an understanding as poignant, a fear as real, as her own.

She looked around the table at the laughing, almost childish faces; she thought of the babies asleep upstairs; she thought of

the boys who were the fathers of those babies, facing horrors and hardships that staggered the imagination. And she could not keep back a little shiver.

"I think, Mattie," she said at last, "that while we are awarding medals to brave women, and honors to women of science and the like, girls like these right here are the real heroines of this war!"

"Yessum, hit is so," Mattie agreed warmly.

Janie and the others looked at each other, surprised and abashed. "Well, gosh," protested Annie May, a little uncomfortable at being thrust into the limelight, "what else *can* you do but—hold on and keep on holding on? After all, the babies haven't anybody to depend on but us. We just have to do the best we can."

Shirley nodded. "That's why I say I think you are heroines," she said quietly. "There are no banners flying for your army, girls—no martial music. It's just washing diapers and sterilizing bottles and mixing formulas, and worrying about your babies when they lose an ounce; and learning to stretch an allotment check until it screams for help; and doing without all the things girls your age have always been accustomed to accept as their right—fun and pretty clothes and dates. I think girls like you are the hope of the nation!"

She looked about the table, flushing, and made a little gesture. "Sorry—I didn't want to make a speech, but that's the way I feel about it."

Louise said, "And we think girls like you, who go right up into the battle lines and nurse our men and send them home to us—we think you're about the grandest people in the world!"

"You said it!" said Janie and there were tears in her eyes and her mouth quivered a little, despite her attempt at a smile.

"Yessum, you sho' did," said Mattie. "I ain't got no chillen, but my sister's boy, he was at Pearl Harbor when dem Japs come in. An' he got hu't bad, but de Army nurses, dey saved his life. I reckin long as ladies lak' yo' is gwine out dyeh to help ouah boys, dey ain't nothin' we can do 'cept what Miss Annie May said—just hold on and keep on holdin' on!"

There were tears in her eyes as she turned and went out, as though afraid to trust herself to say anything more.

There was a little uneasy moment at the table. Not one of the girls about that table was accustomed to looking at herself as a heroine; wistfully, they had looked upon girls in the armed

forces who had the privilege of donning uniforms and marching shoulder to shoulder with their men, as girls who should be called heroines. They had heard a lot about "home-front soldiers" among their own sex, but each girl in that group had looked innocently on that as meaning girls who worked in war plants. The thought that they themselves, who stayed home and bore the babies and brought them up, could be considered heroines, was a startling, and for a moment, almost a disquieting thought.

"Oh, well," said Louise, "I guess maybe we're all heroines. We've all got a job to do. It's a big war and this is a big country and I bet you if we looked around, every man, woman and child of us could find something to do that would help win it faster! But Lieutenant, if you let Mattie's fried chicken get cold, she'll never forgive you."

The tense moment ended beneath her light touch, and dinner was a gay affair. Afterwards, Louise walked to the corner with Shirley, waiting while Shirley caught her bus. And Louise said casually, "I didn't have a chance to tell you I was going in business, did I?"

"Business?" Shirley repeated.

Louise nodded. "It was Dad's idea, really," she admitted. "He and Mother were terribly upset when they discovered what sort of living conditions faced the girls whose husbands were soldiers at the base, or patients at the hospital. The town is jammed, and while the townspeople are doing everything possible, the fact remains that there just isn't enough room. But there are some houses for sale, several of them, and Dad looked them over and selected four of them that were soundly built and bought them! My grandmother left me a small legacy, enough to pay for the houses and to furnish them. And they are going to be sort of 'homes away from home' for girls like me, and Janie, and Annie May!"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea!"

Louise smiled. "I thought so, too! Each house will take care of six girls, on a cooperative plan. They take turns with the housework, looking after the babies, and so on. The prices are scaled so that each girl can afford her share of the expenses and yet the houses will each pay a small profit, so that the girls won't feel that they are on charity. Not one of them wants to, but after all, money will only stretch so far! Dad thought it would give me something to occupy my mind in between being

with Tim. And in a month or more, they will release him from the hospital, and he'll only have to go back for treatments two or three times a week, until finally he's discharged. By that time we'll have a small business—and he won't have to live on Dad's money! Not but what Dad would be tickled silly if he would—but Tim would be miserable if he had to!"

They were silent for a moment there in the moonlight and then Shirley said quietly, "So it's all going to work out beautifully. I'm so terribly glad, Louise!"

"So am I," said Louise and smiled and suddenly kissed Shirley warmly, impulsively. "Thanks for being so swell, Lieutenant. I could never have made Tim marry me if you hadn't helped me! I'll always be grateful to you—and—name our first daughter after you!"

Shirley laughed, touched and pleased. Then the bus came along and she got aboard. She looked back as the bus slid away from the curb, and saw Louise standing in the yellow light of a nearby street lamp, a girl slim and straight and unafraid. And Shirley thought, with a deep humility, that it was to girls like these, unspectacular, playing their small but vital parts offstage, out of the limelight of publicity and public acclaim, who deserved the country's greatest praise.

She thought of Annie May, hovering above the crib of her small son, and insisting that he was "the living image of his dad," as if that small, crumpled face with the funny little button of a nose could bear the slightest resemblance to anybody except another baby; Janie, whose husband was in California and who was hoping and praying for a furlough home to see his tiny new daughter before going overseas; Polly, very brave, very quiet, very tense because she had not heard from her husband in nerve-wracking weeks, but praying that the news that he was a father would reach him somehow, somewhere.

And Louise, quite content to give up the life of a debutante for that of the wife of a physically handicapped man who might not regain his mental equilibrium for years; Louise, talking cheerfully of "going in business" on a small legacy left by her grandmother, knowing that if they were very careful and very thrifty, they might be provided with a microscopic income, less than Louise's spending allowance had been when she had lived at home.

Truly, she told herself, love could do marvelous things to people. And was justly indignant that the thought should bring

Rick Chambers' arrogant brown face and cold dark eyes before her.

"There's one thing you're going to do, my girl," she told herself grimly, beneath the sting of that familiar, painful memory. "You're going to get Rick Chambers out of your mind once and for all!"

She arrived at Bowman Field with a group of several other nurses, all of them excited and eager, and a little apprehensive about what lay ahead of them. There was, in all their hearts, the fear that they might not be able to "make the grade," and they were keyed-up to a tension that made the first week of the course almost a nightmare. Fortunately, their instructors realized this and took it into account, and by the end of the first few days, they were all settling down to a concentrated study that relaxed the tension.

There were thirty-nine nurses in the class, all reporting for an intensive and comprehensive eight weeks' training for a role hitherto never dreamed of in the annals of war. That, in itself, was an awe-inspiring thought, and left little room for any other thought.

The course included aero-medical nursing, aviation nursing, aero-medical physiology and therapeutics, as well as the basic indoctrination of military discipline and Army familiarization. Classes were held from eight in the morning until late in the afternoon every day. There were formal classroom lectures, films, military drill, physical trainings, gas-mask drill, parachute packing, air-ambulance loading and unloading, military customs and instructions on crash procedure.

The classroom work consisted of the study of air evacuation tactics, air evacuation nursing, logistics, tropical, desert, and arctic medicine and mental hygiene in relation to flying and climatic conditions. Demonstrations were given of administering oxygen and blood plasma while flying. Shirley and the twenty or more other volunteers from all over the country, learned about such tropical maladies as dengue fever, yaws, and filariasis. They were taught that the body, as well as the atmosphere, has "air pockets" and that when the atmosphere lessens, gases in the intestines expand, often causing intense pain. Lectures by physicians revealed that the effects of alcohol are doubled by a lack of oxygen, that air-sickness may be hazardous in intestinal cases, that appendicitis or peritonitis patients must never be exposed to high altitudes.

Gas-mask drill was, of course, very important, and not until every girl in the class could whisk her cap from her head, whip her gas mask into place and be completely protected in seven seconds was the instructor satisfied.

Military drill occupied a certain portion of every afternoon, under the direction of two stern young veterans of the art of marching in correct formation. Voices of the nurses were trained, and tried out, and towards the end of the course, commanders and sergeants were chosen for each of two flights.

On the last day of the course, there were eleven examinations, and when the last had been taken, and it was discovered that every girl taking the course had passed with excellent marks, there was jubilation not only among those in the class, but throughout the field.

A never-to-be-forgotten moment in the graduation exercises, when they had each received the small pair of golden wings, was the address by Major General David N. W. Grant, who said gravely and quietly, "Your assignments will probably take you closer to the front lines than any other group of women personnel. You can expect that your plane may sometimes be the target of enemy aircraft. You will be called upon to carry out your work with quiet, purposeful action when all about you may be in the excitement of battle. You will, I am certain, serve with the same heroic endeavor as the nurses on Bataan and Corregidor."

And then after a moment, he went on, "I would like to give you the Flight Nurse's Creed, which I know each of you will adopt as her own, and strive to live up to the complete fulfilment of both the letter and the spirit:

I will summon every resource to prevent the triumph of death over life.

I will stand guard over the medicines and equipment entrusted to my care and insure their proper use.

I will be untiring in the performance of my duties and I will remember that upon my disposition and spirit will in large measure depend the morale of my patients.

I will be faithful to my training and to the wisdom handed down to me by those who have gone before me.

I have taken a nurse's oath revered in man's mind because of the spirit and work of its creator, Florence Night-

ingale. She, I will remember, was called 'The Lady of the Lamp.'

It is now my privilege to lift this lamp of hope and faith and courage in my profession to heights not known by her in her time. Together with the help of flight surgeons and surgical technicians, I can set the very skies ablaze with life and promise for the sick, the injured and wounded, who are my sacred charges.

This I will do. I will not falter in war or in peace.

There was a moment of silence when he had finished. Shirley felt that every word of his moving speech had registered in her heart; the words of the Creed seemed to sing there. And without a sound or a movement, she took them for her own, to guide her and strengthen her in all the turmoil and stress that was to come.

9

The ship was crowded to capacity, a capacity never dreamed of in the days when it had been a luxury liner on the California-Hawaii line, carrying bored, wealthy tourists, sick of fog and winter, to the "Paradise of the Pacific." It was crowded with troops and personnel of various technical units, its hold stuffed almost to the bursting point with cargo more precious than all the treasure of Midas.

Shirley and the flight nurses who had finished the special course at Bowman Field with her, had settled their belongings in a sardine-like space and were walking the deck the morning after a midnight sailing, when she came face to face with—Rick Chambers!

It was so unexpected that she stood stock-still, staring at him, stunned and incredulous. And for a moment she thought he was not going to recognize her. The other nurses who stood beside her looked puzzled, and then amused. One of them signaled the others and they walked on, elaborately unconcerned, out of earshot.

"Well, I'm damned!" said Rick, breaking the stunned silence that had gripped them both. "You, of all people!"

Shirley didn't dare speak, for fear that her voice would

tremble, worse still, that she might burst into tears. Rick's eyes swept her from head to foot. Then he saw the shoulder patch on her sleeve and said, "A flight nurse, so help me! Air Evacuation! How the devil did *you* make that course?"

There was contempt in his voice that stung her to a measure of control that nothing else could have accomplished.

"I volunteered," she told him quietly. "I was accepted, I passed the necessary examinations, and now I'm en route to my station!"

"As simple as all that!" commented Rick dryly. "An angel with borrowed wings!"

She had heard the little phrase before, from the young medical officers she had met at Bowman. There had always been a warmth, almost a tenderness in it; it had been a beautiful compliment. But spoken as Rick spoke it, it was a stinging lash.

"By the way, how's Jonny these days?" he asked.

Incredulous, she stared at him. "Jonny Derwent?" she repeated, not quite believing he could mean that.

"Sure—the man you took away from his fiancée, busting up a perfectly good wedding twenty-four hours before the minister was due to do his stuff!"

"I have never set eyes on Jonny Derwent since—since that night in Palm Beach," she said through her teeth. "Nor have I had the faintest desire to."

Rick nodded, his dark eyes grim and cold.

"Just couldn't keep your pretty little paws off him, though, could you? I tried to tell Katrina that he wasn't in love with you, and that the whole thing had been just— Well, that you'd been making passes, in an underhanded way, at Jonny—"

"That's not true!" she flamed indignantly. "I never made passes at Jonny. I liked him. He was gay and amusing and rather sweet, but he was completely in love with Katrina."

"And that, of course, was a challenge you couldn't pass up," Rick cut in roughly. "The fact that he was crazy about another girl set you wild and so you tried to do something about it. But I could have warned you that Jonny's pretty hard to land. He likes pretty girls, but he's a trifle on the cagey side. To my certain knowledge, Katrina is the only girl he ever seriously wanted to marry—and you fixed that up pretty!"

Shirley drew a long, hard breath and her hands were clenched so tightly that her knuckles made small white mounds. But she made herself speak clearly, almost casually.

"How *is* Katrina, by the way?"

"Splendid, thanks. I'm happy to report that she seems to have made a nice recovery and seems as happy as before she discovered that Jonny was—fooling around with you."

Now Shirley's own voice was stinging. "You're the very soul of chivalry, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

"Chivalry? I wouldn't know. It's a word I've never had much use for," he told her levelly. "It just happens I don't approve of kicking five-week-old kittens, or taking candy from babies—or busting up marriages that have every indication of being as nearly perfect as such things ever are."

Shirley was very stiff and straight now, her chin up, her voice quite steady as she said icily, "I don't seem to care much for this conversation."

Rick nodded as though he could understand that very well.

"I didn't think you would," he said deliberately. "But I've got a few things on my chest I've yearned to get rid of, and this looks like an excellent time. And I'm afraid you're going to listen, whether you want to or not, for I feel sure they'll do you good. Bitter medicine usually does."

"If you are going to say again that I—made passes at Jonny, that's not true!" she blazed. "I liked him, yes! But he was not in the least degree in love with me, nor I with him. And that night when he k-k-kissed me, he'd had a cocktail or several too many and there was a moon and— Well, it just happened and didn't mean a thing! Not a single thing! You and Katrina both made a terrific fuss about it, but it wasn't important in the least! And Katrina knew it!"

Rick was standing with his arms folded, leaning back against the ship's railing, looking down at her as though he had never seen anything quite like her before and as though his interest were that of a scientist classifying some oddly repellent insect.

"You know," he said presently, as though ignoring her little outburst, "it's a funny thing—all my life when I've seen two women scrapping over the same man, I've stood safely out of danger and cheered impartially. May the best gal win! Knowing, of course, that the guy wasn't worth it, but that it would be worse than useless to try to tell the gals that; knowing that the winner would be really the loser, in the long run. But Katrina is different. She's good and sweet and gentle—and she loved Jonny with all her heart."

Shirley was staring at him with unbelieving eyes. He broke

off, scowling, to demand, "What the devil are you looking like that for?"

And Shirley said something that she had never meant to say to him, because she knew he wouldn't believe it; but the words came in spite of her, "Katrina did not love Jonny! She never loved him! She wanted an excuse to break her engagement."

Rick's face had grown gray with anger, his eyes blazing as he caught her by the shoulder, his hand clamping down hard as he gave her a little savage shake.

"Be quiet!" he ordered, and though his tone was low and thick it seemed to ring in her ears. "How dare you attack her? How dare you say such things against her? Wanted to break her engagement! What was stopping her? All she had to do was tell Jonny she'd changed her mind and he'd have set her free! That's about the rottenest thing you have done yet—saying such a thing about her."

Shirley said hotly, "You seem to have a terrific opinion of Katrina."

"Listen, baby, I was born in a theatrical trunk, backstage, between the matinee and the night shows. A musical comedy couple for parents. I grew up backstage. I've known women all my life, women on the stage and women 'on the outside'. And I don't seem to care a whole heck of a lot for any of 'em. The way they lie to each other, and chisel—the way they snag each other's men—the way they fall on each other's necks and chortle, with every evidence of undying affection, *'darling!'*—and then the minute 'darling's' back is turned, out comes a stiletto! No, I'm not fond of women. But girls like Katrina—Well that's different. Katrina is something rare and very special in my experience."

"And in mine," said Shirley through her teeth. "Girls born in the lap of luxury, never knowing what it is to wish for anything because they've got everything, wrapped in cotton wool so that they never know that there is a world outside their own little orbit, shielded and pampered and guarded—"

"And in spite of it all, coming out sweet and fine and gentle, loyal and honest!" cut in Rick, his belligerent tone daring her to deny it.

The sting of that made Shirley fling up her head and flash at him hotly, "If you admire her so, why don't *you* marry her?"

She could sense, rather than see, through tear-blinded eyes, the slight stiffening of his body, the hardening of his face.

"You think I didn't try?" he asked, his voice low, steady, bitter. "But remember I said she was as loyal as they come? It was Jonny with her, first, last, always."

Shirley caught her breath and cried out sharply, "Oh, but that's not true—" and bit her lip hard and made herself stop. Because one look at his white, set face told her the utter futility of trying to convince him of anything he did not want to believe. He was quite sure that Katrina was a little saint; he was equally certain that she, Shirley, was a little devil; and it wasn't going to be easy to make him think anything else.

And so, before he could say anything more, she brushed past him and ran along the deck to the companionway that led to the room she was sharing with five other nurses. She was heartily relieved to find the room empty. She couldn't possibly have faced any of the others.

She had so nearly betrayed herself to Rick! If he hadn't been so angry with her, so completely absorbed in despising her, he must surely have guessed that her interest in him was far from casual! That, not to put too fine a point on it, she loved him! And she could have laughed aloud in bitter derision at the idea that she dared to be in love with a man who disliked her, who despised her so completely!

He would have been astounded, perhaps furious, if he had guessed that the thought of him had lain warm and sweet in her heart during all the weeks and months that had elapsed since she had stood in that lovely tropic garden and turned from Jonny Derwent's gay and meaningless kiss, to look into Katrina's shocked eyes and into Rick's contemptuous, outraged face. Yet she had not been able to stop loving him. She had known that somewhere they must meet again. And yet, she told herself miserably now, she had not dreamed that Fate would be so sportive, in a world at war, as to throw her and Rick into the same war theater. They were both heading for the Pacific, she a flight nurse, he attached to the Troop Carrier Command. He was a pilot who would fly one of the big cargo ships up to the front line, and when it came back, it would be an air ambulance, and a flight nurse would be in charge of its patients.

The chances were a hundred to one that, sooner or later, she would be on duty in a plane piloted by Rick. She might as well face that and make the best of it. This was a war much too big

for any personal feelings to be allowed any play whatever. When the time came for her to enter the plane piloted by Rick Chambers, there would be no way out of it. She would not have stooped to find a way, even if she could.

But to face the prospect of a long voyage confined to a ship that suddenly seemed much smaller than when she had come aboard, seeing Rick three times a day, knowing that he loathed and despised her. Frantically, she sought for some means of avoiding the dining salon and knew that there wasn't any. If she could only learn to stop loving Rick— Well, that would be almost too good to hope for. She had a stubborn sort of heart, she told herself forlornly; she had given it to Rick, unasked, unwanted, and no matter how hard she tried, she didn't have much hope of being able to take it back again.

Her only hope was to try to convince him she disliked him quite as much as he disliked her. If she could make him believe that, then some few small threads of her shattered pride might yet remain to her. But she knew that it was going to be hard to do!

She forced herself to a measure of outward composure and went back on deck. She was heartily glad when she saw that Rick was now part of a group of half a dozen or more pilots whose insignia marked them as members of his command, and she rejoined her own group.

"Hi," said a small blond girl who had barely managed to pass the physical requirements for the flight nurse corps, being only a little above five feet tall and weighing barely one hundred and five, "once aboard the lugger, and you come face to face with the man of my dreams. Who's he, Andy, my gal?"

"A man I met on a case once, when I was doing hospital nursing," answered Shirley quite casually.

"A few details, my girl! Such as name and stuff like that?" demanded the girl.

"His name is Rick Chambers, he's a lieutenant in the Troop Carrier Command, and undoubtedly you'll be flying with him to and from the front lines as soon as our installation is complete!" answered Shirley lightly.

"Nice!" beamed the pretty little blonde. "I knew I was going to like being a flight nurse. You meet such charming people! How's for introducing me?"

Another girl, dark and slender and stately, laughed a little. "Look, angel child," she cautioned the other, "it's obvious that

this is your first ocean voyage. Don't you know introductions aren't necessary among fellow passengers?"

The little blonde dimpled demurely and her big blue eyes were round and limpid with guileless innocence. "Well, well, *well!*" she chirped happily. "What could be nicer? What do I do—drop my handkerchief as I pass him? Or pretend I'm falling overboard?"

"A bit more subtle, don't you think, Andy? Why not wait until lunchtime and see what happens?" suggested the dark girl, laughing.

And of course, it happened that before the day was over, there were no introductions necessary. The fact that all wore the uniform of their country was sufficient introduction, and before dinner time there was a distinct feeling of friendliness and almost a hint of pairing off, though that would not be really noticeable for a day or two.

The salon was crowded and airless, with blackout curtains at the windows, for this was the summer of 1943, when ships slipped across the dark ocean showing no tiny speck of light to any skulking "wolf pack" that might evade for a time the eagle eyes and ears of the United States Navy.

Among the pilots in Rick's group there was one Rufus Hartley, a round-faced, red-headed, almost cherubic young fellow who asked Shirley to dance. He beamed happily as he drew Shirley into his arms and they began to dance. The room was gay and filled with laughter and good-humored noise, as it would be wherever so many young people got together, whether they were headed for active participation in a World War, or for a luxury cruise in peace time. Shirley and Rufus were friends at once. He was the cheerful, happy-go-lucky small-town boy who didn't know what an enemy was. People and animals would always like Rufus at first sight; he couldn't imagine their not liking him any more than he could imagine not liking them. And from that first night, Shirley accepted Rufus and his friendship as some small measure of protection from any contact with Rick. She knew that Rick watched her and Rufus with a curious, hostile regard. But that didn't bother her; she was too glad to have Rufus to shield her from Rick's inimicable attentions.

It was difficult to find a spot on a ship so overcrowded where she and Rufus could be alone. But there was a little space in the bow, where, curled up on piles of cargo, they sat and talked

for hours. From almost the moment of their first meeting, Rufus had told her of the girl back home, who was waiting to marry him as soon as he got back. He produced her picture, and reddened with delight at Shirley's honest admiration for her. He talked of her ceaselessly, and Shirley was glad to listen. She soon felt that she knew the small Kansas town that was Rufus' home as well as she knew Palm Beach, where she had spent so many happy years.

Several days after that first meeting with Rufus, she was walking along the deck, on her way to meet him at their "trysting place" when Rick planted himself firmly before her and said unpleasantly, "Still trying, eh, Angel? Well, it looks as though you'd manage it this time. He's rather an unsophisticated kid. Not very sporting of you. It's like shooting a sitting bird. But that wouldn't worry *you*, would it?"

Shirley, jerked out of unhappy thoughts, stared at him for a moment, not quite comprehending.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," she managed at last.

"Haven't you? Rufus Hartley, of course."

"Oh," said Shirley. "And what am I supposed to be doing to Rufus Hartley?" She deliberately made her voice sound curt and contemptuous.

"You've got him completely wacky about you, and if you play it right, I don't think you'd have any trouble marrying him—if you want to," he added grimly.

Shirley laughed at him frankly and insolently.

Rick's face hardened and his eyes flushed.

"So you're just amusing yourself again, as you did with Jonny? Still the gay little siren. How the dickens they ever let you get into that uniform is something I'll never understand."

"Shall we just say that I satisfied some rather hard-to-please medical officers and passed a rather stiff course—and here I am?" she suggested sweetly.

Rick studied her for a moment and nodded reluctantly. "At that, you're a good nurse, I know, and you'll do a good job out here, if you can forget that siren business for a few minutes," he admitted unwillingly. Then suddenly, as though he had not meant to say it at all, but as though the words escaped him, "See here, Angel—were you in love with Jonny?"

She so nearly said, "Of course not—I was in love with you," that she had a moment of panic before she could answer

stiffly, "As I've tried to tell you time without number—no! Never, for one single instant! You wouldn't let me explain."

"Is there an explanation to alter things?"

She caught her breath for a moment, but before she could rush impulsively into speech, she saw the look in his eyes, and knew with a dull sense of pain that it was futile. "Would you believe it, if there were?" she asked instead.

"Frankly, no!" he admitted harshly. "I have very good eyesight—the Army Air Force says so—and I know what I saw."

She drew in a deep breath and tilted her chin a little and said coolly, "Suppose we just leave it at that, shall we?" And before he could protest she had turned and was walking along the deck to where Rufus was waiting for her.

He came eagerly to meet her, and Shirley, knowing that Rick was watching her with angry, accusing eyes, tucked her hand through Rufus' arm with a gay little proprietary gesture that made Rufus cock a startled, quizzical eye at her.

"Hi, what's clawing ol' Ricky?" he demanded, when they had settled themselves on the piles of cargo in their own small nook.

Shirley managed a little unsteady laugh.

"He thinks I'm flirting with you!" she said lightly.

Rufus' eyebrows went up a little.

"Maybe it's some of his business?" he asked, puzzled.

"I wouldn't know!"

"Oh," said Rufus, in frank relief, "for a minute there I thought you were falling for the big lug. Most of the pretty gals do! He always leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him. I wouldn't want him to go making dents on yours, lady!"

Shirley set her teeth hard for a moment, but when she spoke her tone was gay and light. "Don't give it a thought!" she said gaily. "I'm proof against the likes of him!"

Rufus nodded, in complete understanding.

"Insulated against him, the way I'm insulated against every gal in the world except Honey," he said contentedly.

He looked down at Shirley and after a moment he said gravely, "You're a pretty swell person, Shirley Andrews! A pretty girl who will let a guy talk for hours about *his* girl without getting upset or worried! You seem to understand when a fellow likes to talk about his own girl. You're swell!"

Shirley said lightly, her eyes warm and gentle, "You're not bad yourself, Rufus."

They smiled at each other, warm friends, affectionate, honest

and interested. Rick, striding along the deck, discovered them so, and his mouth tightened and his eyes grew even more bleak and hostile. For an instant, his stride broke, as though he hesitated on the verge of speech. Then he jammed his hands tightly into his pockets and strode on.

Rufus chuckled. "A picture of a guy doing a slow burn!" he said with simple satisfaction. "He goes for you in a big way, Shirley. The guy's jealous! It sticks out a foot!"

"Nonsense! There's a girl back home he's complete gaga about," said Shirley shortly, and before Rufus could speak, she said swiftly, "You were telling me about Honey trying to get a job in the war plant. Did she make it?"

And a moment later Rufus happily launched on one of his endless sagas of the girl back home. It was his favorite subject and he could dwell on it for hours with Shirley having to do nothing more than look interested and murmur now and then, "No! Did she really?" and, "Then what?" while busied with her own thoughts.

10

That evening just before they went to dinner, Ruth Martin, the pretty little blond flight nurse, and Shirley were alone for a moment in their cabin, and Ruth said hesitantly:

"Look, Andy, mind if I ask you a question that's maybe sort of impertinent?"

"Not if you don't mind my not answering it—in case I don't want to."

Ruth nodded, and asked soberly, "What's wrong between you and the dark and devastating Lieutenant Chambers?"

Startled, Shirley stared at her, and Ruth flushed and went on doggedly, "What I mean is—are you in love with him?"

Shirley just managed not to betray herself. Instead of the little gasp she almost gave, she made herself laugh lightly and say, "Do I behave as though I were?"

Ruth nodded soberly and said, "Well, sometimes you do—and sometimes you look as though you detested him—"

"That's when I'm really being me!" Shirley cut in grimly.

"I wonder!" said Ruth gently.

Shirley was devoutly glad that the light in the cabin was

dim and that she stood with her back to Ruth, pretending to be busy adjusting the seams of her stockings.

"Sometimes," Ruth went on, "when a girl detests a man the way you say you detest Rick, then it means she's really crazy about him but fighting it hard! And— Well, you see, Andy—if you're not in love with him, then I think maybe I could do myself some good with him. He seems to like blondes and he's a lot of fun. Who *is* he, Andy? Aside, of course, from being the one Air Force pilot the whole war is being held up for—according to the way his gang tell it?"

"I met him in Palm Beach when I was on a private duty case," said Shirley, glad that her voice sounded casual and impersonal. "He's from a theatrical family. Was a star in musical comedy when he enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor."

"And he was playing around with a Palm Beach family that could afford a private-duty nurse?" puzzled Ruth.

"He'd been dancing in a night club there and had a friend, Jonny Derwent, who was well inside the higher income bracket," Shirley explained with elaborate carelessness. "They'd learned to fly together and were very good pals. Naturally, when the friend got himself engaged to the girl who was my patient, Rick rode along with him. And that's how I met him. Understand now?"

Ruth nodded. "All except why you treat him as though he had a slight case of leprosy. How come, Andy? If there's some deep, dark, ugly secret in his past that makes him not quite nice to play with, let a pal in on it, won't you? All the rest of us are ready to do a wingding if he so much as glances our way, but you knew him B.P.H.—before Pearl Harbor."

"I just don't happen to like him—that's all!" said Shirley, devoutly hoping that she was making the lie convincing. "But I know of no reason why *you* shouldn't. He's quite respectable, so far as I've ever heard!"

Ruth's small, charming face was touched by an impish grin. "Then okay if I hurl myself at him, even if I bounce back?" she asked.

"Okay by me, Martie—very okay by me," answered Shirley and tried to make it gay and casual. "And now for chow. I'm starved! Must be the sea air, eh?"

She was glad to escape from the cabin without betraying her inner emotion by so much as a quiver of her voice.

Later on, when the usual tiny space in the crowded salon was cleared, and the nightly dancing began, Rufus claimed her first of all. But across his broad shoulder she saw Rick watching her with a curiously taut, inimical glance, and her heart shook a little. Because he was making a slow but purposeful way towards her and she knew that he was going to break in.

She was panic-stricken in the brief moment that elapsed as he approached. She dared not trust herself to dance with him: his arms about her, here in this small, crowded space, surrounded by hundreds of eyes—even the fact that all the others would be looking on would not protect her from some small, revealing gesture or look that would betray the secret of her love. And that would be an unendurable shame.

Frantically her mind sought for some way that she could avoid dancing with him. If she could make him too angry to dance with her, if she could annoy him. Suddenly she remembered Katrina's saying, "Some critic called him 'Featherfoot' and Rick loathes it. Only his best and closest friends dare use the name." And suddenly there was a wicked gleam in Shirley's eye.

The next moment Rick was tapping Rufus lightly on the shoulder, saying cheerfully, "Break it up, son. I'll finish this."

Shirley looked up at him, smiling brightly, and said, "Ah, there! If it isn't Featherfoot himself!"

Everybody around them heard it. Rufus stared at her, and then gave a little yelp of delighted boyish laughter, and repeated, "Featherfoot? Where the heck did you dig that one up?"

Shirley said, sweetly surprised, innocent as a baby, "Oh, didn't you know? That's his Broadway name. When he isn't in the Air Force, he's a dancer, and people call him Featherfoot—on account of he's such a marvelous dancer. But I thought all his friends knew that!"

Rick was dark with anger, but now the good-natured kidding had started, and there was laughter and heckling and Rick said, "A good many of my enemies know it, too—but no matter. I'm just as featherfooted as ever, Angel. Like me to prove it?"

And the next moment, in spite of her desperate little maneuver, she was in his arms and they were moving like one person, their steps so perfectly matched that she felt as though she drifted on a cloud. But when they reached the salon door

that led out on deck, he lifted her over the threshold, slammed the door shut behind them, and in the silvery white moonlight that flooded the deck, he looked down at her, darkly angry.

"You little—devil!" he said savagely. "I ought to wring your neck for that! I'll never live it down! I'll be ribbed from Australia to Tokyo and all way stations with that damned nickname! Why the blazes did you have to dig it up?"

His anger steadied her. She leaned against the railing, looking casual and amused, just as though her knees were not shaking. Her smile, in the moonlight, was fairly convincing.

"Oh, don't you like the nickname? I thought it cute," she said brightly, inanely.

"Cute?" he groaned, and thrust his fingers through his hair and glared at her. And as though he could not quite keep his hands off her, he took her by the shoulders and shook her, hard at first, and then more gently, and then—not at all. But his hands still held her shoulders, and her face was tilted upward so that the moonlight lay upon it. With his back to the moon, his own face was in the shadows, and she could not guess at his expression.

She held her breath. She could not have moved if her life had depended on it, nor could she have spoken. She felt the warmth of his hands creeping over her, stirring her blood to a mad, insistent throbbing. Her heart pounded so that she felt sure he must hear it. It sounded in her ears much louder than the steady, even throbbing of the ship's engines.

They stood for what must have been only seconds, but that seemed to Shirley to stretch endlessly into time. And then his hands moved from her shoulders, unsurely, fumbling a little, until they touched her soft, smooth throat on either side.

"I ought to wring your pretty neck," he said huskily, his voice shaken, uneven.

And then suddenly he bent his head, and in the soft darkness shot through with silver moonlight, his mouth found hers and claimed it in a kiss that was everything she had once dreamed, hungrily, hopelessly, that his kiss would be. A kiss that was hard, demanding, and then quite suddenly became tender, as though startled at the soft flowering of her warm, fragrant mouth beneath its touch. A kiss that began almost brutally, and suddenly became warm and tender, yet somehow gloriously urgent.

For the space of a handful of heartbeats the kiss endured.

The moment might have been all eternity, or a breath of time, the flicker of a moth's wing; her heart, plunging sharply like a suddenly, cruelly spurred horse, had no way of knowing the length of that kiss. But suddenly, so roughly that she stumbled a little, he thrust her away from him, and she saw his face white and set, his eyes blazing with anger.

"So the 'old, black magic' is still working for you," he said very low, his voice rough and stinging. "Congratulations! You can still get any man you want, if you just concentrate on the poor devil!"

And before she could recover from the brutality of that, he turned and strode away down the deck and was swallowed up in the darkness. She stood where he had left her, leaning her shaken body against the railing, making no effort to check the slow tears that crept down her cheeks. Above her head, the moon that had been so warmly yellow looked cold and remote, and the stars that swung in the inverted bowl of the sky were like great golden fish.

From that night until the voyage ended, Rick avoided her. Since he made no effort to disguise his intent, all the nurses and pilots were aware of it, sometimes uncomfortably so, when Rick would stop in the middle of a story and walk away at Shirley's approach. Searching for a reason for this, the group finally decided that Rick so desperately hated the nickname, Featherfoot, that he hated Shirley for having revealed it; and while they agreed among themselves that he was being surprisingly childish and petty about it, they shrugged and dismissed the subject.

The voyage had been long and tedious, not nearly so long in reality as it seemed, but long enough to make them all hail with the greatest delight the morning when the ship dropped anchor in a harbor so blue and so peaceful looking that it was hard to believe how recently it had been overrun by Japs. It was now one of the most important supply bases in that part of the Pacific. Its base hospital was the one to which men were flown from the combat zones, and where they were treated and cared for until they were able to take the long voyage back to Hawaii, or even to the States.

This first view of a South Sea island was wildly exciting to all the *malahinis*—Hawaiian word which the original "settlers" on the island applied to those who came for the first time. The beach was shining coral; the palm trees and the thick jungle-

like growth back of the miniature city that was made up of the supply depot and barracks, the hospital and various administration quarters, were already recovering from the savage onslaughts of the battle to take it from the Japanese. Here where the soil was rich and black and the sun was bright and hot, things grew fast and lushly, so that the scars of the terrible battles that had resulted in the island's capture by the Americans were already being covered.

The field hospital was a marvel of efficiency, and the girls were welcomed with honest enthusiasm by an overworked staff. There must be a period of orientation and some additional training before they would be capable of the task set for them; and girls who had trained and drilled and studied at Bowman Field until, as one expressed it, "I'm afraid to bend down and tie my shoe for fear I'll miss a week's work," now found that there was more of the same, not quite so longdrawn but even more intensive.

There were the calisthenics and the various ingenious methods of "toughening up"; there were long hikes, with heavy packs, into the jungle behind the base; there was a field bivouac; and in the afternoons when they had returned from "workouts" there was swimming from the shining coral sands.

There was a makeshift but surprisingly well-equipped recreation hall where they could dance, and there were outdoor movies occasionally. To each and all of the entertainments that could be contrived, each girl went surrounded, rather than escorted, by dozens of eager soldiers, sailors, and marines.

As the "toughening up" process was completed, the squadron leader assigned the girls to flights. Every day one of the flight nurses went "up the line," finding what traveling space she could for herself in the heavily laden cargo plane, and came back thirty-six hours or more later, bringing with her twenty to thirty wounded or sick men.

Little Ruth Martin, returning from her first flight, said, "It scares the daylights out of you, only you know you mustn't show the slightest trace of anything but quiet and calm. And all you can think of is, 'Oh, God, don't let any of the boys die on this trip!' But there's really nothing to it! Smooth as silk! The pilots are swell. I believe it now when I hear them say they pick the best pilots they've got for these jobs. You just tend to your patients and the pilot tends to the ship, and before you know it you're home again!"

The round trip to the front line took two days: one day up, the night at the base, and back the next day, so that the entire flight was in the daytime. At the end of each run, a nurse was given two days off duty, when all she was expected to do was rest, lie in the sun on the beach, or otherwise amuse herself so that there was no danger of overtense nerves. At the end of three months' duty, each nurse was given a ten-day furlough and flown to a New Zealand city, to luxuriate in "civilization" as exemplified in paved streets, blessedly hot baths, beauty shops, telephones and the sight of tall buildings. At the end of a year of flight service, there was a long leave, and a trip home.

But not one of the girls in the whole squadron of flight nurses had a thought beyond the actual job at hand: "up north" to the fighting zone, back home with her patients, and then the same thing over again, each time snatching twenty to thirty sorely wounded or desperately sick men practically from the jaws of an evil and hungry death at the hands of the little yellow men.

11

On a cloudless blue and gold morning that might have been made to order as a background for a Technicolor movie, Shirley stood beside the big cargo plane that would carry her on her first mercy flight.

She was dressed in trim blue-gray gabardine slacks, a shirt that was exactly like the pilot's shirt, a battle jacket over her shoulders, her trim little overseas cap with her insignia cocked brightly above one eager brown eye.

It was very early, but the cargo had been loaded during the night, and with such nicety of spacing, such a perfect balancing of the load, that there was barely room for the pilot, the medical corpsman who would be Shirley's assistant, and Shirley herself.

When she saw the pilot for her first flight coming towards her, something in her heart said grimly, "Of course. Wouldn't you know it would be Rick? How could it miss?"

"Good morning," he said casually, his eyes cool and bright. "So it's my wings you're borrowing this morning, Angel!"

"Through no fault of my own, you may be quite sure," Shirley told him curtly.

"Oh, no, this is on me," said Rick and grinned tautly at her amazed look. "I knew it was your turn to go north and I traded runs with a pal. I may as well admit it, Angel, I've a certain curiosity to see how you'll react under fire. I suppose you know our destination this morning is a spot where things are pretty rugged."

"Naturally, or we wouldn't be going up to bring out the more seriously wounded," said Shirley shortly.

Rick studied her for a moment and then he said quietly, "Rufus sent you his love."

Shirley stiffened and her eyes were cold. "I'm sure he did nothing of the kind. A girl named Honey back in his home town has *all* his love."

Rick's eyebrows went up a little. "Oh, so you know about Honey?" he asked gently.

"Of course!"

"And even knowing about Honey wouldn't make you—let him alone?" he demanded harshly.

Shirley's eyes were wide and startled, and then anger shook her and she said the one thing she knew would annoy him most. She lifted her shoulders in a little shrug and said coolly, "After all, Honey's back in the States. I'm *here!*"

His eyes glinted and he said something under his breath; but before he could answer her, one of the ground crew saluted and said crisply, "Ready to ride, sir!"

Rick nodded, returned the salute almost mechanically, and looked down at Shirley, a curious light in his eyes, his voice clipped and abrupt as he said, "Get aboard, Angel. This is it!"

She swung herself up into the plane and Rick and the medical corpsman followed her. The door slammed shut. Rick settled himself at the controls. There was a moment in which he eased himself into familiarity with everything about him. Then he signaled and the big plane slid down the runway, so heavily laden that it seemed to Shirley incredible that it could ever leave the ground. But before it had reached the end of the runway it had lifted and its great wings carried it, zooming like a bird, straight north. Below her, the island base that had seemed so large faded away until it looked like a smudged white handkerchief dropped on the blue water.

Every available inch of space aboard the plane had been

used for cargo. There were no seats, and Shirley and the medical corpsman found places for themselves on the top of the cargo. There was a huge sack of mail with just space enough above it for Shirley to insert her body. And there she curled up and relaxed. One of the first things a nurse learns is to fall asleep anywhere, any time, that she has the chance; this trick is especially valuable for an Army nurse, who may work long, hard shifts and catch a bit of rest at odd moments.

But for a while Shirley was unable to sleep, and she disliked that very much. There would be little chance for sleep after they reached their destination, one of the northern islands where the battle was progressing in favor of the Allies, but where there was still enough resistance to create a number of casualties.

She mustn't let Rick disturb her, she told herself grimly. She was a flight nurse; she had sworn to keep herself calm, aloof, in full possession of all her faculties for the sake of the men who would be in her care, whose very lives would depend on her coolness. She must never let any personal feelings upset her enough to imperil her composure and her cool-headed mastery of a situation. And eventually she was able to sleep.

It was late afternoon when she awoke. Below her, she could see the deep blue of the ocean, broken by foaming breakers where hidden coral reefs could be seen from this height. There were tiny coral atolls, looking no bigger than a baby's curled fist; there were larger ones hidden beneath the fronds of palms, and lush with green vegetation, and here and there were tiny puffs of smoke from native fires. Occasionally there was an island that had been swept by the war, leaving only devastation, wrecked palms and terribly significant debris.

Shirley realized that they were beginning to descend. She sat erect, took off her cap, brought a small comb from her shirt pocket and combed her hair into its usual neat, smooth waves. Her compact came next, smoothing powder on her straight, delightful little nose. She touched her lips with lipstick, smoothed it gently, and last of all brought out a vial of perfume from the pocket of her blouse, touched a drop to the lobe of each ear, and another to the backs of her wrists. Then she carefully recorked the bottle and tucked the comb, the compact, the lipstick and the vial of perfume back into her pocket. When she looked up she saw that Rick had been watching her, sardonically amused, and the color burned hotly beneath her smooth skin, though her eyes met his straight and level.

As he set the plane down on an airstrip that an unbelievably short time before had been jungle, Rick rose and came towards her.

"Always the little siren, eh, Angel? The lipstick, the perfume, the compact—even up here!" he drawled contemptuously.

"Especially up here," she told him levelly. "For morale—mine, of course, as well as the boys. It's one of the first lessons we Army nurses learn: that no matter how grimy or mussed our clothes may be, if our lipstick is straight and we smell nice, it makes the boys feel better! They like it!"

"That's one lesson I'm sure you had no difficulty learning," he said unpleasantly.

Shirley stiffened. "Look," she said through her teeth, "don't make me hate you! Isn't there enough hatred loose in the world without you and me staging a small and personal war? I know what you think of me—"

"I wonder if you do!" said Rick very softly, and there was an odd look in his eyes.

But Shirley rushed on, "And I dislike you just as much as you hate me, but do we have to keep sniping at each other all the time? We've got a darned important job to do. Can't we postpone our private war until some other time?"

By now the door was open and the medical corpsman was standing beside the steps, waiting. Shirley turned and moved swiftly towards him without waiting for Rick to answer her.

Outside the plane stood a great crowd of grimy, tired, unshaven soldiers and marines; the cargo ship had brought desperately needed supplies, and most precious of all, it brought mail! Letters from home! Every man not actually held at his foxhole by the necessity of "pumping lead" at the enemy, or on patrol watching him, had gathered about the plane, hungry, eager, anxious eyes riveted to it.

When Shirley stood in the plane's doorway, and the men saw her, there was a moment of awed silence, as though they could not believe their eyes. And then such a yell went up from that assembled crowd as must surely have reached and startled the ears of the enemy; she was the first white woman, the first girl from home, that most of the men had seen in more than a year. Shirley whipped off her cap and waved it to them, and the last rays of the dying sun turned her curls to copper-gold and brought another yell of eager delight as the men crowded forward, as

though just to stand close enough to hear her voice, even to look at her, were a precious boon.

A grimy, middle-aged officer greeted her with simplicity but a moving sincerity, "It's been months since we've seen anything like you out here, Lieutenant! I can't tell you what it means to all of us."

"It's a very great privilege to be here, Captain, and I mean that very sincerely," she told him quietly. "If the nurses back home could know what a reception like this means, we wouldn't have to be begging ten thousand more to volunteer. There'd be more than we need."

He didn't get a chance to answer her, because those tired-eyed, unshaven soldiers, most of them boys in their teens or early twenties, had forgotten anything except the need to see her close, to hear her talk.

One haggard-eyed young marine who couldn't have been more than twenty for all his hard-bitten, grim-eyed look, learned towards her frankly, sniffed like an appreciative puppy and burst out joyously, "*Gosh,* but you smell good! Like back home!"

Shirley turned her head to Rick, who stood just behind her, unable to move because of the press about her; and over her shoulder she said coolly, "See what I mean?"

Rick grinned a little, unwillingly, and lifted his hand, the thumb and finger joined together in the world-wide gesture that, among pilots, means "contact!" or "okay."

Shirley was escorted along the trail from the landing strip to the carefully camouflaged living quarters of the island base. These consisted mostly of foxholes adorned with a typically American wealth of ingenuity. There was a single row of tents, disguised so that they were not visible above the tops of the palms. There was a big mess kitchen, roofed with palm leaves and equipped with several things that the Japs had left behind when they had been forced from the island, and which the mess sergeant and his staff had calmly adapted to their own use.

At the flap of a small tent, the captain who had escorted her, together with every available man on the island, paused and said, "We hope you'll be comfortable here, Lieutenant. This is our choicest tent. It's only a few feet from our largest and most nearly comfortable air-raid shelter. And you must see to it that at the very first sound of the air-raid warning, you make for that shelter!"

Shirley laughed, and the surrounding escort admired her and sighed and echoed her laugh, just because it sounded so strange and yet so gloriously familiar in their ears.

"Don't worry, Captain, I'll probably be the first one in the shelter if anything happens!" she assured him firmly.

"Something will happen!" said the captain grimly. "The enemy has a quaint little idea that if he can't outfight us—which, of course he can't!—he can destroy or at least damage our effectiveness by keeping us awake all night. So we are having quite a few nuisance raids, a lot of noise and a few bombs. But you are much too precious for us to run any risks—so into the air-raid shelter for you at the first peep of the siren!"

"I promise, Captain."

Reluctantly the men filed away. But at mess, a little later, she could have wept for the excitement and the delight they all revealed at sight of her. They were battle weary, achingly lonely for all the beloved, familiar things they had left behind them when they came out here to fight an enemy they had not suspected. As they crowded about her, and fought to serve her, and to touch her, to get close enough to listen to her when she spoke, or when she laughed, she knew that to each of them she was a symbol of some beloved woman back home—a wife, a sweetheart, or a mother—a symbol of all the women for whose safety and happiness they were fighting. And as she looked about her, into their young, tired faces, alight with eagerness and joy in her presence, she denied any weariness, any desire for sleep. She danced with them, and laughed and talked, and in every way possible tried to ease a little for them the strain under which they had lived and fought and worked for so many months.

When, at last, practically the island's entire staff had escorted her to her tent and gone away reluctantly, she stood in the white moonlight and waved to them before she went inside. She *was* tired, but it was hard to fall asleep. She had only been asleep a few minutes when she heard the weird, familiar rising and falling of the air-raid siren. She tumbled out of bed and felt for her slacks and her shirt. The siren was shrieking maddeningly now, and as she thrust her feet into her shoes, a voice outside yelled sharply, "Hi, Angel! Get moving! Don't you hear the siren?"

Her heart jumped a little as it would always do at the sound of that voice, but she did not answer as she stumbled out of

the tent and down the two steps to the beach. The moonlight was a white floodlight, a perfect bombing night; beneath the palms, the shadows were ink-black, and as Shirley emerged from the tent, Rick's hand caught her elbow and raced her across the few feet of space and tumbled her down into the foxhole that was an air-raid shelter.

There were others already in the shelter. She couldn't guess how many, for it was pitch dark here, beneath the cover of palm leaves and canvas that shielded the opening.

Rick thrust her through the group and back to the very confines of the shelter. Those at the front stood where they could peer through a narrow slit in the shielding cover, and called to each other excitedly as they watched and listened to the fight. Because this was not, as the captain had suggested to Shirley that it might be, merely a nuisance raid. This was a real raid, and its object was to land troops at the northernmost tip of the island, where a body of Japs had been cut off from supplies and from rescue.

The Zeros zoomed in, unloaded and zoomed away. The anti-aircraft was busy; planes from the base roared into combat, and there was a dogfight in full view of the shelter. Those up front watched it with something of the air, Shirley thought, of football fans keeping score on "the big game of the season."

"Scared?" asked Rick softly during a momentary lull in the battle.

"Certainly I'm scared," she told him sharply. "I've got a job to do tomorrow. I can't afford to get hurt."

It was too dark for her to see him, but she thought he nodded as his answer came, cool and deliberate, "That makes sense!"

Beneath the cover of the battle outside and the wild excitement of those who shared the shelter with them, they could talk as though they were alone. Nobody was paying the slightest attention to them.

A bomb fell close, so close that the earth was shaken and there was the crashing of trees and the air was filled with a clamor so terrible that the ears shrank in pain from hearing it. Shirley could not keep back the little shudder, as she put her hands to her aching ears. Rick put his arm about her and drew her close, protectingly. Involuntarily, instinctively seeking relief from that awful din, she hid her face against his shoulder. And very softly, she heard him say, his lips against her ear, "Take it easy, darling. You'll be all right. It's nearly over."

She was very still, all but holding her breath. The terror and the horror outside faded; the storm of fury and hatred and devastation all but ceased to exist for her. She was in Rick's arms, and he was holding her close against him, and he had called her "darling!" Her heart shook within her. He'd called her "darling!" She couldn't quite believe it. She tried to calm herself, to tell herself sternly that it didn't mean anything. People went about saying "darling" and meaning nothing whatever by it.

She was trembling in spite of herself, trembling so that she could barely stand. She hoped crazily that he would believe that she was frightened by the raid; it would be an unendurable humiliation for him to know that she quivered like a plucked violin string simply because his arms were about her! That she trembled because she loved him with all her heart and his most casual touch had the power to send the blood whipping through her veins with a madness almost too sweet to be borne.

Outside, the storm's violence had died away. Shirley never quite remembered just when that happened. One moment Rick was holding her close, and her heart was beating so hard it shook her whole body; the next moment there was a silence that seemed almost more terrible than the awful noise it had followed; and then—the "all clear" from the air-raid siren. There had been that tense, breathless interval of waiting. Had the enemy planes gone away, or would they sweep back? But eventually the signal came, and those who shared the shelter with Shirley and Rick burst out of it to check up on the damage done and to compare notes.

As though for the first moment conscious that he had been holding her close and protectingly in his arms, Rick let her go. Shirley put shaking hands to her hair in the little immemorial gesture of a woman after a crisis of any kind, and managed an unsteady laugh.

"That—seems to be all for the night," she stammered inanely. "Everybody's gone."

Rick followed her through the darkness to the slit of moonlight that penetrated the covering of the entrance. And as she felt her way up the steps, he stood beside her at the top of the steps, saying anxiously, "Are you all right, Angel?"

"Of course. What's an air raid more or less?" she managed with as airy a tone as she could. "I'm going to see if I can be of service at the First Aid station. They'll need help."

"Oh, now, wait a minute," protested Rick. "We're taking off at four A.M., and it's after one now. You've got to get some rest."

"Oh, stuff!" answered Shirley elegantly. "Where's the percentage in going to bed for a couple of hours? I'll have forty-eight hours off duty when I get back to the base. I can catch up on my sleep then."

"D'you know something, Angel?" he said as he walked beside her towards the dressing station. "You're quite a girl, at that!"

Shirley's heart leaped a little, but she made herself say lightly, almost insolently, "That, from you, is flattery of the most incredible sort! Are you sure you feel well?"

Rick grinned a little, though it was not very mirthful, only a flash of strong white teeth in the heavily bronzed face.

"You think that's flattery? You should hear me when I really get going!"

"So I've been told," she answered lightly. "I've heard quite a lot about you as a ladies' delight! And as a pilot—and as a—featherfooted dancing man—"

His hand caught her elbow and swung her around to face him. His eyes were blazing and his tone was savage, "Ladies' delight!" he repeated furiously. "Why, you—you insolent little twerp! I've seen prickly porcupines, and I've seen pretty girls, but this is the first time I've ever seen the two of them rolled into one. Every time I try to be halfway decent to you, you lash out at me with all your spikes quivering murderously."

Shirley flashed hotly, "Well, what do you expect me to do? Sit up on my hind paws, and beg for a kind word from you? After all, we're still enemies. We've just postponed the hostilities for a while. And I still don't *like* you!" (She set her teeth hard above the little wail that struggled to be heard: "But I *love* you—darn you!")

They had reached the dressing station. Casualties had been blessedly light, but the patrols had brought back two or three badly wounded men from forward outposts. Though the doctor and his medical corpsmen made polite protest against Shirley's proffered assistance, they were glad enough to avail themselves of it when she insisted. Those boys who had been on outpost and had not previously seen her were so entranced at the sight of her face, the light set up in the dressing station flickering in the soft waves of her hair, that they forgot their suffering

and lay quietly, looking at her as though just the sight of her and the sound of her soft, friendly voice were a miracle.

When it was necessary to decide which of the wounded must go back first, leaving some of the others for the next trip, twenty-four hours later, Shirley found a lump in her throat that made speech very difficult. So deeply rooted was her training that she was able to conceal her emotion, and her voice was soothing and cheerful when she bent low above a stretcher on which lay a boy whose wounds were less serious than the one next to him.

"Sorry we can't take all of you back this trip, boys," she would say quietly and cheerfully. "But there'll be another ship in here tonight, and we'll have you back at the base tomorrow evening. Your pal over here must go first."

Invariably the answer, in a voice that was part of a cheerful, courageous chorus that wrung her heart, was "Sure, sure—that's okay. That guy over there's a lot worse hurt than I am. Get him back soon as you can. We'll be all right until the next trip. Doc here'll take care of us."

She tried to be very brisk and military, and called on every ounce of her training and her self-discipline; for any hint of a break, the slightest display of emotion would have shamed their courage and their willingness for self-sacrifice. She felt like kneeling before them; instead she made herself gay, and pretended to minimize their suffering, as she knew they wanted her to.

One man—he was scarcely more than twenty—caught her hand as she passed his stretcher, and pressed it hard, clinging to it almost desperately. She paused beside him and smiled down at him. "What is it, soldier?" she asked softly.

Into the boy's haggard face there came a faint touch of color, and his bashful smile twisted her heart as he said faintly, "Sorry, Lieutenant. I didn't mean to be fresh! It's just that you look a little like my girl back home!"

Shirley smiled at him, and bent lower to say in a confidential tone, "Only I'll bet she's a lot prettier, isn't she?"

The boy grinned. "Well, she's a mighty pretty girl," he admitted.

"You know something?" This was for his ear alone and she would never forget the look in his eyes. "I'll bet a nickel there's a letter from her in one of those mail sacks we brought up here."

The boy grinned more widely, and a spasm of pain slid over his face and was swallowed in the radiance of his eyes. "Sure—sure, I know there will be. She never misses a mail. She's pretty wonderful!"

"And so are you!" said Shirley, setting her teeth lest her voice shake just the tiniest bit and betray her. She moved on, pausing an instant beside every wounded man, offering him the comfort of a friendly greeting, a glimpse at her, a woman who was a symbol of all the beloved women back home for whom they fought so valiantly and so unquestioningly.

12

When, after breakfast with the company, she stood beside the big plane, she was efficient, alert, very military. The huge plane that yesterday had carried precious cargo, had now been transformed. Inside, from floor to ceiling, stretched a steel-strong webbing, with loops at intervals, so that the stretchers carrying the men could be inserted into those loops, three or four in a tier on either side down the length of the ship. Thus twenty-four to thirty patients could be carried in one trip; if there were ambulatory patients, small bucket-seats were let down at the sides, and the capacity could be increased. But following last night's raid, Shirley saw that all her patients were litter cases, and her heart sank a little. All desperately wounded men whose very lives would be in her hands for the next twelve hours. It was a frightening thought, but their unquestioning faith in her, their dauntless courage, shamed her moment of panic.

She stood with the charts in her hand, checking each patient as they were loaded in the plane, while Sergeant Summerlin, her own assistant, watched from inside with an eagle eye. Loading the patients was a matter of well-trained efficiency, and within a breathlessly short time, they were all aboard, and Sergeant Summerlin was saluting and saying briskly, "We're ready to ride, Lieutenant!"

Rick nodded to her as he swung himself aboard behind her, and she waved back at the soldiers who had lined up to see the take-off. And then the big plane, with its precious freight, lifted smoothly into the air and turned its nose southward. Shirley, standing for a moment looking down the double row of

litters, said under her breath the little prayer that has become traditional with flight nurses: *Oh, God, don't let anybody die this trip!*

She drew a deep breath as though the simple, heartfelt prayer had given her renewed courage and strength. And then, attended by Sergeant Summerlin, she made her rounds, seeing that every patient was as comfortable as medical skill and her own and Sergeant Summerlin's ingenuity could devise. Some of them were still sleeping from the effect of sedatives administered at the dressing station. She checked dressings and studied each man's chart to familiarize herself with his needs for the next twelve hours. Then she and Sergeant Summerlin nodded at each other, smiling a little as they realized that everything humanly possible had been done for them.

There was no room, of course, for a chair or a seat for herself or the sergeant. Nor was there now any pile of cargo on which to curl up and rest, even if she had dared the risk of falling asleep. So Shirley went to the back of the ship, where her eyes could range the line of litters on either side, and sat down on the floor, still intent on the charts.

Sergeant Summerlin remained where the smallest gesture, the slightest sound could jerk him into instant watchfulness, ready to care for the smallest need. But the first two or three hours of the flight passed without event, and it was almost noon when Sergeant Summerlin came back to her, worried and speaking softly.

"Lieutenant, I think maybe the fellow in the second row over there, second from the bottom—name's Tommy Richards—is—passing out," he said quietly. "I don't like his color."

But Shirley was already on her feet, and a moment later her fingers were on the boy's wrist. He was very young, gaunt and hollow-eyed, a thin, gangling boy with thick red hair and a prominent Adam's apple that worked convulsively as he turned his head restlessly and then was still.

Shirley said swiftly, "Blood plasma, Sergeant. It's time he had another shot."

In the litter above, a man raised his head and watched them, seeming almost without interest, saying nothing, his dark eyes bitter in his tired, lined face. He was older than the Richards boy, probably twenty-four or -five.

Shirley stood beside the Richards boy and watched, with a feeling of awe that never grew less, the miracle of the blood

plasma. Very slowly, with such a terrible slowness that she was almost afraid to believe it, she saw the blue pallor fade a little from the gaunt young face; the blue shadows at his temples receded a very little. The pinched look about his mouth was going; beneath her gentle fingers she felt the wavering pulse grow faintly stronger, and knew that once more the blood plasma had done its miraculous work.

The boy's mouth twisted a little and she heard him mutter something. She bent low to catch the sound, and heard him say faintly, "Hi, Mom! I'm—scared! It's dark—*Mom!*" The last was a whisper of childish terror. Instantly Shirley's hand closed warmly over his, and she bent very low, her lips against his ear to say soothingly, "It's all right, son. It's all right! There's nothing to be afraid of!"

There was a tense moment and then he turned his head, his eyes still closed, and a smile that was that of a child who comes suddenly out of chill, lonely darkness into beloved, sheltering arms, he whispered, *"Gosh,* Mom—I was scared! It was so dark and—so cold!"

Shirley held his head against her breast, her arm about him, and talked to him in a soft murmur that was unspeakably soothing to the boy's tortured nerves. He sighed like a child and moved his head a little to a more restful spot, and his hand clung tightly to hers.

She lifted her head and looked straight into the embittered bleak eyes of the man in the upper litter.

"He ain't no coward," said the man savagely, though his voice was low pitched. "That kid was never scared a minute in his life! He's just homesick!"

"You think I don't know that?" answered Shirley between her teeth.

The man nodded, still grim looking. "I just wanted you to know he's got more guts— Sorry, Lieutenant, but I ain't very good at talking pretty. But the kid there's got more nerve than anybody twice his size in the outfit. He's so damned scared of *being* scared that he'd rush a whole damned regiment of Nips to prove he ain't scared! But when a fellow faces 'the last long mile' I reckon he realizes he's up against something he can't handle—and maybe he's got a right to be scared!"

The boy whispered in sudden, sharp fear, *"Mom!"*

"Right here, boy," said Shirley softly, tenderly. "Go to sleep,

boy, and rest. Pretty soon now, you'll be safe and well and strong. There's nothing to be afraid of any more, son!"

She felt the tension go slowly out of the pitifully broken body, but not until he was sleeping soundly did she take her arm from beneath his head or release her hand that had been clutched so tightly in his that her fingers were numb. She stood beside him until she was sure that his sleep was the deep, healing slumber that would bring him back to life, and not a delirium that would tear still further at nerves that were already tortured almost beyond endurance.

"You know what that kid did, Lieutenant? Took a Jap outpost single handed," said the man in the litter above. "Got separated from his patrol somehow, and came up suddenly on the Nips and heaved a hand grenade in among 'em; and as they poured out, he picked 'em off—just like picking ducks off a pond! Comes from the Tennessee mountains, the kid does, and says he learned to shoot when he was nine years old. Said his pap used to send him out hunting to get meat for the table, and when he come back he had to have a piece of game for every bullet he'd fired!"

Shirley looked down at the sleeping boy, his long face relaxed, the breath coming evenly; and the man in the litter above said dryly, "Yeah, the kid's a hero. And he's going to hate all the fuss people are going to make about him. Heroes are a dime a dozen out here. Everybody that's still alive is a hero. Hell, that's the only way you keep on *being* alive!"

"Don't get yourself all worked up, soldier. You're supposed to relax and rest," Shirley warned him.

He looked at her curiously. "Sure—I know! Only it burns me up seeing kids like this one getting kicked around. It ain't right to send kids into war. Kids of eighteen and nineteen—Why they ain't even dry behind the ears yet! Fellows of twenty-one to twenty-five— Ain't it better to send them and let kids like Tommy get their growth back home?" he demanded savagely.

Shirley smiled faintly, her eyes dark with pain. "I guess you'd better talk to Hitler and Hirohito about that," she said dryly. "Their idea seems to be that the younger they are, the easier they are to lead."

The man nodded. "I still maintain it ain't right to draft kids eighteen and nineteen years old."

"You'd be surprised how many of them enlisted, and how

many of those even younger tried to," she reminded him, though her heart burned with the things he was saying.

"Yeah—fool kids that don't know what it's all about," he growled.

Because she did not want him to get excited, she said, deliberately teasing, "My, my, grandpa, what a long, gray beard you've got! How old are you—twenty-two?"

The man did not smile, nor did he relax. "Compared to that kid downstairs," he said grimly, "I'm eighty-five my next birthday. I grew up the hard way: never knew a home, didn't have a mother or father that I ever saw. According to my history, I was found, at the ripe old age of three weeks, wrapped in newspaper and laid on top of an ash barrel for the 'cinders man' to dispose of. I was put in a home, and I stood it until I was twelve, then I took it on the lam, and I've been on the lam ever since. That makes me a hundred and fifty years older than Tommy here."

Shirley said quietly, "That makes you much too old, then, to go on chattering! You're going to drink this like a nice boy, and get some sleep! Orders, my lad!"

He looked down at the sleeping Tommy, and said bitterly, "And there are folks back home that won't go down to the Red Cross Blood Donor's bank because 'it's too much trouble' or somebody told 'em it was dangerous! Phooey!"

But he swallowed the drink she held for him, and a little later when she came back to check on Tommy, the older man was asleep.

She felt that time stood still. Already accustomed to the slight motion of the ship as it plowed its way with a speed that made the flight of a bird seem almost clumsy by comparison, she walked quietly through the ship, as though she were walking in the ward of a hospital. With Sergeant Summerlin's expert assistance, she tended them all, and when she and the sergeant stood for a moment at the back of the ward, she looked at him curiously.

"You seem to have quite a knack at this, Sergeant," she said, and the boy flushed with pleasure.

"I was in first year at Med when the Nips hit Pearl Harbor," he told her. "My dad's been a doctor all his life, and his dad before him. I guess from the day I was born I never thought of being anything but a doctor."

"But couldn't you have been exempt to continue your studies?" she asked, puzzled.

He looked out over the tiers of men, and said quietly, "Can you think of anything that would be better training, Lieutenant? And anyway, a fellow couldn't just go on studying textbooks and listening to lectures with things like this going on in the world. I'll be a much better doctor, don't you think, after this?"

"I suppose so," she said, liking and admiring him.

And then he chuckled, wryly. "Though, come to think of it, since I'm planning to be a baby specialist, maybe what I learn now won't be such a help, after all!"

"You are fond of children?" asked Shirley.

"Crazy about 'em."

"And of course there's a girl back home who's going to help you?" suggested Shirley, smiling.

The boy's face darkened a little. "Nope," he said, almost shortly. "It takes a long pull and a hard pull to make a doctor, especially if you want to specialize. And Dad can't help me a lot—not financially, that is. I was working my way through. I went through pre-Med that way and it wasn't so tough. But I'm saving most of my pay and sending it home to put into War Bonds, so that'll help when I'm through here."

"You're quite a guy, Sergeant!" said Shirley with simple fervor.

The boy's face was still dark, touched with bitterness.

"No, I'm just a lug, Lieutenant," he told her grimly. "If I was worth my salt, I'd be in there with a gun, taking what these fellows do—not just running around peddling pills and binding up their wounds and showing other fellows how to load 'em in and out of ambulance planes."

"But that's wrong, Sergeant," she protested. "You are even more important, in your job, than if you were just another guy with a gun! After all, somebody's got to look after the ones who carry the guns—"

The boy nodded, still somber. "I know, but it's a job that a woman could do, or an older man, a 4-F! If there were more nurses, and more Army Nurse's Aides— Sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't mean to blow my top. I'll have a look-see."

He went quickly and quietly down the double row of tiers, and Shirley watched him, pity and admiration and understanding for him in her heart.

A moment later she followed him, and he pointed to a bandage that was staining ever so slightly. Together he and Shirley worked to rebandage and to relieve the man's pain. The Richards boy still slept, and Shirley paused beside him a moment to look down at him, with a deep tenderness in her heart. She thought of the woman—"Mom"—in that cabin back in the Tennessee mountains; of the "Pap" who had trained his young son to shoot with such accuracy that each piece of game he brought back for the family accounted for each piece of ammunition discharged. And she thought of the boy going back to them, a leg gone, a perfect yet inescapably artificial leg replacing the one that had known the rough mountain trails and the thick mountain woods. It made her heart heavy to think of them, all of them, the thousands upon thousands all over the world, of every race, creed or color, who had gone marching off with martial music ringing in their ears, with brave flags whipping in the breeze, the shouts and huzzas of those left behind, the tears shed in secret that there might be smiles to remember in the long months ahead. She wondered about the women in Germany whose sons lay dead in the snows of Stalingrad, the burning deserts of Africa, the mountains of Italy, the women of Japan who had loved their sons, too, and who had sent them off to war with proud hearts and high hopes. How would those women feel when there came back to them the ruined, broken wrecks of men that had been their fine sons? Would they still worship their Emperor, the Son of Heaven? Would they still "Heil Hitler" and bow submissively to his iron will? Because these women were mothers, too; they had loved the tiny babies that had lain warmly against their breasts; they had cherished them, and gloried in their young, strong bodies, and had built dreams of their future. And the implacable will of a fanatic had sent their sons to die or to be broken in body and mind. And she thought that the hatred in the souls of all women, whether German or Japanese, whether English or American and French or Dutch, must turn upon the war lords with a fury so great that no power on earth could stop it. For the hearts of women were alike in one great thing: love for their children. And surely the hatred of women bereft, the cries of children sacrificed to a lust for world domination, must haunt the makers of war even beyond the grave.

She thought of Annie May, and her small, red-faced, in-

dignant son, with his little starfish hands and his absurd fluff of silky dark hair. Annie May was a symbol of all the girls, flung headlong into a sudden maturity, who had given birth to children, whose fathers, beardless boys for the most part, were fighting and dying with a courage never before seen in the world of war.

Would it all be to do over again twenty years, or thirty years, or fifty years hence? Not, she told herself grimly, if all the peoples of the world who make war could be forced to look upon its awful results. It mustn't ever happen again, she told herself savagely! Not ever again! And knew, with a sickness at her heart, that it would come again, that no matter how brave and how determined were the great statesmen of the world, war could never be really ruled from the face of the earth.

It was a conviction deep in her heart, and one to which she never gave words. If there were people who believed that there could ever be "a war to end war", then let them have the comfort which she could not accept for herself.

When, at last, she saw the base below, tiny scattered buildings glittering in the dying sunlight, the blue-green waves breaking on the shining white beach, her heart rose up in her throat in a deep and joyous thanksgiving. The plane descended, settling lightly as a bird. The ambulances were waiting, the attendants standing ready for their swift and gentle task of removing the wounded to the cars for the brief run to the hospital.

Not until Shirley had seen the last of her patients into the ambulances, not until she had turned in to the hospital the charts and her report, did she relax. And then she had a queer feeling as though her nerves, stretched to the breaking point, had snapped; she was limp and exhausted and her head swam from the sheer relief of knowing that her patients had been brought in safely. She stumbled over to the nurses' quarters and to her own room.

The others, not on duty, were waiting for her, and Ruth asked eagerly, "How did it go?"

"Smooth as silk," answered Shirley.

"It always does. It's a milk route!" said Ruth and smiled. Her own first flight was so recently behind her that she could understand all the things Shirley could not, or would not say.

13

They were to learn, those intrepid girls who looked so slight and frail, and as though their most serious thought should be a new hair-do, a new frock, or the new man in the office, that the flight north and return was not always "a milk route."

There was the time when Ruth was on duty with a returning flight, and the plane had developed engine trouble four hours out from the combat zone. There had been nothing for it but a forced landing; the pilot had done his level best, as any pilot on such a mission always would. The great plane had settled on the ocean, and the rubber life raft had been floated. In the crash, Ruth's ankle had been broken, though not even she herself knew it until the last patient had been placed aboard the life raft, and the medical corpsman and the pilot were waiting to take her out. She had fought them off furiously, while she clambered about the body of the plane, already sinking at the nose, and gathered up every scrap of medicine, every bit of bandage, every bit of equipment. And when the pilot and the corpsman had stormed at her, lest she stick with the plane until it went under, Ruth had screamed back as furiously, "If you think I'm going off and leave all this medicine and equipment that I have sworn to protect and to guard—"

"Look, lady, you're a darned sight more important than the medicine," the pilot had tried to tell her.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'd be no good to the men without the medicine and equipment," Ruth had told him shortly.

But at last they had managed to get her out and on the raft and not until then did they know she was hurt. She had crawled about the raft, assuring herself that everything possible had been done for the patients before she had let the corpsman bandage her ankle. And then she had laughed and joked with the patients, and had made the whole thing seem like a weird picnic, until a relief plane, some hours later, had picked them up. And when they had finally reached the hospital, and it had been found that none of the men had suffered from the experience, Ruth had, to her undying shame, fainted. She had been so embarrassed to remember that, afterwards, that nobody had had the heart to tease her. And she had been so miserable, hobbling about when

they had let her out of the hospital, watching the other nurses take off on their northbound flights, and return with their patients, that finally the doctors had bundled her off, weeping and protesting, to New Zealand to recuperate.

She wasn't at all consoled by the knowledge that she would receive a decoration for her work. What she wanted most of all was the work itself, and she was inconsolable when at last she was put in a plane heading south, instead of north.

And there was the time when Shirley, in charge of a flight that included a number of abdominal cases, received the pilot's signal, and when she bent above him, heard him say quietly, "Sorry, Lieutenant, we've got to upstairs. Enemy planes ahead."

"Upstairs? But we've got abdominal cases. The higher altitude will be very dangerous and very painful," she protested, her first instinctive thought stumbling into words.

"Enemy planes can be dangerous, too—and painful, when you're unarmed, as we are," the pilot reminded her dryly.

"But surely, not even a Jap would fire on a hospital ship!"

"That just proves you don't know anything about Japs, Lieutenant. They'd love it!" said the pilot grimly. "We've got to get upstairs and get there quick. Some of our boys are on their tail. It won't be for long, maybe."

"Of course," said Shirley, knowing that it was the only thing, yet dreading the danger and the increased pain for the men who were her charge.

The plane lifted sharply, and she and Sergeant Summerlin worked with all the skill and the ingenuity at their command to relieve the added pain; but there was so desperately little that could be done! This was, she feared, one of the times when a patient might be lost, but it would not be through any lack of effort on her part, she promised herself grimly.

The plane climbed steeply. She and Sergeant Summerlin administered oxygen, gave blood plasma, changed a bandage, soothed a restless, white-faced boy who struggled with all his failing strength against the groans that fought at his lips. She held his hand closely, and thrust a sterile cotton pad between his teeth so that he could grind down on it with all his strength and thus ease the pressure of pain. And as she watched, helpless to do anything more, her heart was filled with such a violence of hatred for the enemy as to make her almost physically sick. She knew that Sergeant Summerlin felt as she did. They worked like two pieces of exquisitely balanced machinery, almost without a

word exchanged between them. Then, after what seemed years and years and years, but was really not quite an hour, the plane began to descend again, and the almost unbearable pressure to ease up. No, that wasn't by any means "a milk route." And there were many like it.

None of the flight nurses talked much about their experiences. It was as though each girl preferred to lock away in her own heart the sick moments of desperation, the cold, creeping feeling of dread, the moments of sheer panic—never for themselves, always for the men in their care—that came over them. Defensively, they were airily casual, making light of difficulties and hardships, pretending that they did not exist, behaving almost as though their work were humdrum and monotonous. Yet no nurse, no woman in history, had ever known the experiences that they would have had you believe were almost commonplace.

Now and then Shirley had seen Rick. Once they had danced together at the Officers' Club; occasionally she saw him at the outdoor movies. He was always casual and pleasant. But that night in the foxhole far north when he had held her close in his arms, and called her "darling" might never have been. There were times, just before she fell asleep, when she wondered if it had all been a dream—and knew, with a tingling of her pulses, that it had not been.

Because he could have made opportunities to see her, to talk to her, to be with her for brief moments if he had wanted to, she knew that he did not want to. And there was nothing she could do about that. And she was a complete, double-starred fool, she kept reminding herself furiously, for wanting him to want to see her.

So little stood between them, and yet—so much! Katrina had done her work well; with deft strokes she had built up in Rick's mind the picture of a cheap, conniving little creature who had had her predatory claws out for another girl's man, a girl so intent on a cheap flirtation that she had not been stopped even by the knowledge that the man was within twenty-four hours of marrying the other girl.

She wondered, sometimes, how a man like Rick could have been so deceived by Katrina. He thought Katrina fine and sweet and gentle, a loyal and devoted girl whose heart had been all but broken by the discovery of her lover in the arms of another girl. Shirley could smile a little, wryly and without amusement, at the falsity of that picture. If Rick could have heard Katrina

saying, in that sweet, little-girl voice, "There's always Reno—or Mexico City!" And Shirley could hear her own shocked voice protesting, "But if you don't want to marry him, why not tell him so now?" And Katrina's cool, "What—and have Rick despise me for the rest of my life?"

But the memory that made her shiver was Katrina saying in a voice all venom, in terrifying contrast to her look of a spun-sugar angel, "If only Jonny would do something—give me some reason for breaking if off! But he won't, damn him! He's too tiresomely faithful—Old Dog Tray!"

Shirley's mouth felt dry with the remembered ugliness of that. Poor Jonny, whose very faithfulness and devotion had annoyed Katrina! Poor Jonny, who, in the perfectly innocent exuberance of his happiness, had kissed her! Katrina had leaped upon that meaningless, silly cocktail kiss to convince Rick that she was pathetically betrayed and that the only honorable thing she could do was to break her engagement! And Shirley could not but remember Jonny's bewildered heartbreak at the scene. She gave herself a mental shake and said sternly, "Now *that,* my girl, will be quite enough of that! That's all in the past and you're a sap to keep thinking about it! Katrina did her work well, and you might as well face the fact! So up and doing, no looking back!"

On an evening when she had checked in her last patient and had turned in her report and her charts, she reached the nurse's quarters to find word that the squadron leader had asked her to look in.

She found Amy Lawrence, whom they all liked, and whose ability as a leader they respected enormously, looking over some charts in the tiny office that was a walled-off bit of the barracks.

"Oh, hello, Andy," said Amy cheerfully. "I've been looking over your reports. You're doing a swell job!"

Shirley's eyes brightened and the color burned warmly in her cheeks, for Amy's praise meant a great deal to her.

"Thanks a lot!" she beamed.

Amy grinned. "Not but what it's expected of you," she added frankly. "The Air Evacuation Service expects every gal to do her duty—even a little beyond that! But I just wanted to tell you that you're starting your leave in the morning."

Shirley gasped, "Why, I didn't ask for leave!"

"Oh, you didn't, didn't you? Well, whoever gave you the idea you have to ask for it? Your three months' duty is up. You've

got ten days' leave coming, and you and three other girls are due to hop south in the morning. You're taking off at six-thirty, so you'd better get a good night's sleep."

Shirley hesitated, and asked after a minute, "Do I have to go?"

Amy looked at her sharply. "Goose! Of course you have to go! Regulations are regulations! And regulations say a ten-day leave in the big city for every flight nurse who's had three months' actual service. So get going, sister—get going."

Shirley laughed and yielded. But she really didn't want to go. Soberly, when she went back to her room, she realized that undoubtedly the regulations were wise. She was not consciously tired and she rebelled at the thought of ten days away from the base, of missing her usual flight; and yet she had noticed in herself in the last two or three days a new tension, a "nerviness" that made her particularly susceptible to conditions about her. The men on her plane seemed to her more heartbreaking than usual; she had had to fight back the tears several times lately; her voice had shaken a little this morning when she had tried to soothe a boy in delirium who was caught in a nightmare of remembered terror and pain. No, the regulations were wise. She dared not risk the slightest loss in her efficiency. And the moment she became nervy or emotional her efficiency would be impaired. And so she ceased to rebel against the unwanted leave.

In the bright morning light, Shirley and three other nurses were waiting for their summons to the plane. Since the plane was empty of everything except sacks of mail from the boys in the hospital and from "up the line," the four flight nurses would ride in accustomed ease and comfort.

For a moment when she had been about to board the plane, trim and smart-looking in her beige uniform, Shirley had looked swiftly at the pilot. But he was not Rick, and there was no reason why she should have been so disappointed that he was not. No reason at all why she should have expected—or even hoped—to travel with Rick!

When the plane had taken off, the girls settled themselves happily, and Lieutenant Mary Randall (who was, later on, to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross, one of the very few ever to be awarded to a woman, for "heroism far beyond the line of duty") sighed and said happily, "I'm going to have a haircut, a shampoo, a manicure, and maybe a facial! I may even get reckless and send my laundry out!"

"Me," said Lieutenant Ginny Parker, a tall, devastating blonde with a delicious Southern drawl that was the envy of Mary with her clipped New England speech, "me, I'm going to soak for about twelve hours straight in the hottest bath—with slews of bath salts in it!—that I can find, and then I'm going to sleep for at least a week!"

"Too bad about you never getting enough sleep!" said Mary lightly. "I'll bet back home on the old plantation, you had a raft of darkies to wake you at late noon and spoon-feed you your breakfast!"

Lieutenant Ginny Parker grinned, but there was a sudden shadow in her eyes. "Back home," she said quietly, "I got up at four o'clock, milked the cows, cooked breakfast for my father and three brothers, did the farm chores and went to school!"

Mary grinned ingratiatingly. "There you go, spoiling all my illusions of you! I thought of you as a sort of Scarlet O'Hara—in a perfectly nice way, of course—with a background of a Colonial mansion, a julep-drinking papa and darkies singing spirituals in the moonlight, with a mockingbird hiding in the magnolias!"

Ginny smiled back at her. "Sorry to destroy your pretty picture, but I'm a tenant farmer's daughter!"

"It's funny," Lieutenant Julia Gordon said thoughtfully, "here we've all been working together and living together and fighting together for three solid months, not counting the training period, and we don't know one darned thing about each other! And yet people say that three women, let alone twenty-five or more of them, can't live together in peace without gossiping and spilling their innermost thoughts!"

Shirley laughed with the others. They all liked Julie. She was a pretty little thing who, like Ruth Martin, had barely been able to achieve the physical requirements, being just over five feet tall and weighing a scant one hundred and six. Yet Julie was strong as a turtle, and stout-hearted with it.

"Well, maybe in these ten days we'll get a chance to get acquainted!" suggested Shirley. "What are you planning to do on your leave, Julie?"

"Combine the things Ginny and Mary are planning. The shampoo, facial, and stuff—and the hot bath and three days' sleep! Then I'm going to call up everybody in the telephone book just to say hello, and walk on paved streets and forget how sandy beaches feel! What about you, Shirley?"

"Look at people who have all their arms and legs," said Shirley almost grimly, "and see if I can find any of those people that the newspapers back home keep harping about—the people who don't know there's a war going on! Personally, I don't believe they exist."

They chattered like schoolgirls, a little giddy at first with the sudden slackening of a responsibility they had all accepted so willingly, but that now they were realizing had been completely engrossing and almost overpowering. They would return to the base, eager to assume once more that staggering task, but now they were four young girls, ready for fun and excitement and relaxation, just as though they had not had their baptism of fire in battle zones, and the excitement of life and death from which there was no escape.

Sooner than they had hoped, the plane circled the landing field, and they were peering eagerly out of the windows at the toy town spread below, while the pilot identified himself to the field and requested permission to land. The permission having been given, he circled once more, dipped, set the wheels down on the strip, and the plane taxied to an easy stop.

Mary and Ginny tumbled out of the plane, Shirley and Julie following them. Half a dozen young pilots whom they had met at the base, or who had flown them up and down "the line" were waiting, and there were excited greetings; like four girls arriving for a college prom and being greeted by their "dates," they were swept off to a waiting taxi and in to town.

At their hotel, they found Ruth Martin, so nearly recovered that she needed only the assistance of a stout walking stick. She greeted them with the jubilant news that she was going back with them at the end of their leave. She and Shirley were to share a room, but the pilots insisted that there was no time to waste, so off they all went, with Ruth added to the group, to a late lunch, that developed into tea and went on to dinner, while they talked and danced and relaxed.

So well trained were they that it was possible for all of them to obey orders and relax completely. They did not permit themselves to think of the hell that was going off "up North", not to remember that heartshaking, ugly business that was being created for their work and skill later on, when they had gone back to the base, rested and keen to the job.

They shopped, prowled among the amusing and interesting little side streets of the beautiful, thriving city; they slept late

in the mornings, lunched lazily, and dawdled through afternoons, almost invariably surrounded by eager young men from their own country, from every branch of the service. They met and liked girls from the Red Cross, from the WAC and all the other branches of the service apart from, and yet a part of, their own service.

They were having tea one afternoon in the hotel lounge, surrounded by the usual group of attentive young men, when two men came into the lounge, looked around and then headed their way. And Shirley was appalled to realize that her heart wasn't disciplined at all, for one look at the tall, lean, brown young man in the AAF uniform made that silly heart turn right over. Yet when Rick paused at her table, she looked up at him as lightly, as casually as though he were simply an acquaintance whose identity she couldn't quite settle in her mind.

"Oh—hello, Rick," she said, dimly proud that her voice didn't shake, and that her hands were beneath the table so that their sudden, startled contraction should not catch his eyes. "What in the world are you doing here?"

The others were chattering away, and for the moment it was almost as though Shirley and Rick were isolated.

"Looking for you, of course. What else?" said Rick quietly, though there was a look in his eyes that was distinctly disquieting. "I heard you were around, so of course I looked you up."

"But how flattering—" she began in a tight little attempt at brightness.

"Don't get flip with me, young woman," he ordered sternly, and she felt her face go hot. "Besides, here's somebody I thought you ought to know—a darned swell guy. You and he have some mutual friends. May I present Lieutenant Marshall, Lieutenant Andrews?"

The good-looking, blond young man beside Rick beamed happily at Shirley and said gaily, "A very great honor, and a real pleasure, ma'am. I'm delighted!"

Shirley laughed and presented the others. A smiling waiter brought two more chairs and wedged them into the space about the table, so that the two newcomers could sit down. Somehow, Rick had managed it so that he sat beside Shirley, with Lieutenant Marshall on her left.

During the hubbub of laughter and chatter that surrounded the table as the newcomers fitted themselves into space not

half large enough for them, Rick said to Shirley, "Remember I said you and Marsh had mutual friends?"

She looked at the blond young man, and said, "Have we, Lieutenant?"

"Rick says you know Jonny Derwent," said Lieutenant Marshall. "I was with him in Italy. He's quite a guy! *Quite* a guy!"

Shirley set her teeth for a moment and then she said gravely, feeling Rick's almost sardonic gaze upon her, "He is, isn't he? I don't know him very well. I met him when I was in private nursing. His fiancée was my patient."

Lieutenant Marshall's face lit up with enthusiasm.

"Oh, then you know Lightnin', too? Rick didn't tell me that. Isn't she swell? Everybody in Italy is crazy about her!" he said eagerly.

Puzzled, Shirley repeated, "Lightnin'? I meant Katrina Sutphen. She was Jonny's fiancée—and my patient."

Lieutenant Marshall grinned in momentary confusion.

"I'm sorry. Maybe I dropped a brick?" he apologized. "I thought you were talking about the Red Cross clubmobile girl Jonny's marrying next month. The Katrina person is someone I never heard of."

"Miss Sutphen is the girl Jonny was going to marry," said Rick dryly, and now his eyes were on the salt cellar he was pushing this way and that on the polished table. "Until she caught him chiseling and broke the engagement."

Shirley was very still, her hands clenched tightly in her lap, and she would not look at Rick.

Lieutenant Marshall, sensitive enough to realize there were hidden currents here he could not hope to understand, made a little gesture and said, "Well, if Jonny was chiseling, he's changed! He's a right guy—a very right guy! And if any of the gang ever catch him doing anything Lightnin' wouldn't like—Well, they'll make him wish he'd never been born! They're all crazy about her. She's an American girl who's been overseas from the beginning—one of the first clubmobile girls to go over. She was stationed in England first and that's where Jonny met her; later, they ran into each other again in Italy, and— Well, he had a couple of thousand rivals, but he won out. And I think he appreciates his luck!"

"She sounds like a very interesting person," said Shirley quietly. "And what an odd nickname!"

"It's one the boys handed her in England. She's seemingly as

calm and cool and casual as they make 'em, but the way she does her job is one of the slickest things you ever saw. She's got a slow Southern drawl, and a voice that makes you think of all the pretty things you ever heard about the South—magnolias and moonlight and bayous with water-hyacinths and stuff. And she's got a sense of humor that's swift as lightning, and no one has ever heard her make a spiteful or malicious remark. When the kids would come in after a training flight, or after they'd been 'briefed' and were just before going on a mission, she'd have piles of hot doughnuts and American-made coffee, and soft drinks and cans of fruit juice all iced and waiting. Where she got the ice we could never be sure—but there it was. And once a man had mentioned his favorite drink there, she never forgot it. Her memory is a sort of legend; the boys used to try to trip her up, to tease her—but I guess she just had so much warmth and tenderness in her heart for them that there was never a stranger there. I've watched her, after the boys had had their coffee and doughnuts and were taking off; I've seen her stand beside the clubmobile, with the tears running down her face, and her eyes lifted to the moonlit sky, and I've heard her say over and over again, 'Bring 'em back safe, dear Lord—bring 'em back safe!' "

Lieutenant Marshall's voice had roughened, and he looked around the little listening circle almost belligerently.

"All right, I'm a softie and it got me," he admitted sharply. "Anybody want to make anything out of it?"

Shirley put her hand swiftly on his and said quietly, "We're all softies and it would have got us, too. So go on! She sounds pretty wonderful!"

The Lieutenant looked at her gratefully, and managed a shy grin. "Okay. Well, it happened that one night Jonny's ship was late. The rest had returned, and their crews were all relaxing and pretending like hell that they hadn't died a few deaths of their own while the ships and the lads had been out. An hour passed and another, and everybody had about given up hope. Then word came in: an FW had tangled with Jonny over the Channel, and the boys had 'hit the silk' and were in the drink. The Channel is probably one of the meanest bodies of water on earth, for its size, and that night it was colder than— Well, it was *cold!* But one of those darned little minesweepers that looks like nothing on earth and that's manned by a crew so tough that they could take the devil himself on—one of those babies picked up Jonny and the crew. Four of the guys had

gone West. Jonny was in pretty bad shape, but they got him into the hospital and Lightnin' just about took over. Oh, she stuck her job on the clubmobile, and she didn't let down a minute. But after her hours of duty there, she practically moved into the hospital and took charge of Jonny and pulled him through. He wasn't very much interested at first in pulling through; his wound was not so bad, but he had pneumonia. But Lightnin' wasn't letting him go, and finally he discovered that she was on his side and rooting for him, and he decided he'd better live if that was the way things were. About the time he was ready to be up and on his feet, she got her orders and was transferred to a clubmobile outfit in Italy. There wasn't time for them to be married then, but the Fates seem to take a hand in stuff like that occasionally, and a couple of months ago, Jonny was ordered to Italy and based not too far from her outfit. And they're going to be married next month, when they both have a week's leave coming, and if possible, they're honeymooning in Africa—Algiers, they think."

He looked swiftly and contritely about the table and flushed.

"Heck, I didn't mean to move in and take over," he apologized. "I seem to have been making myself a speech, but any man in the outfit that ever knew Lightnin' will do the same. She's quite a gal."

"She must be," said Shirley warmly. "I'm glad. Jonny's a pretty nice person himself!"

Rick said levelly, "The girl he was engaged to back home was a pretty nice person, too—remember?"

Shirley looked at him straightly, and tried desperately to keep the bitterness out of her eyes and her voice as she said, "I remember! A great deal that you didn't know—" and too late she set her teeth hard in her lower lip.

The music was beginning again. Someone asked Shirley to dance, and she escaped from the table and Rick with an eagerness that she could not disguise. As she turned away, she saw the sudden anger flare darkly in his face. Before she and her partner had half circled the small dancing floor, Rick was beside them, tapping her partner on the shoulder, saying firmly in a tone that would brook no denial, "I'm moving in, pal—blow!"

"Who says so?" demanded the partner belligerently and whisked Shirley out of Rick's reach.

Shirley looked back and saw Rick stand for a moment, indecisive, before he turned on his heel and marched out. She let

go a breath of relief and her partner looked down at her apprehensively.

"That was pretty foul of me. I could have asked you what you thought," he tried to apologize.

Shirley laughed a little, hoping her voice didn't sound too hysterical, and said lightly, "Back home, when I was a kid, we used to have a crazy little song—I don't remember the words, but it was something like, 'I always dance with the guy what brung me.' The sentiment's all right, even if the English isn't!"

Her partner grinned in relief and his arms tightened about her, and he said happily, "I can't ever remember hearing a beautiful thought more beautifully expressed! I'd like it a lot if all my dates from now on would carry that thought in their minds!"

14

In spite of attempts at self-discipline, Shirley slept badly that night, and in the morning, impatient with herself, she decided to rise early, breakfast alone and go for a long walk, to clear her mind and to get healthily tired so there would be no more nonsense about sleeping poorly.

But as she came into the hotel dining room, Rick rose from a table for two, and came to meet her.

"I hoped you'd be down early," he said, drawing her to the chair opposite his own, with a quiet determination that she could not have evaded without a scene. "I thought about having the desk call your room, but I didn't want to disturb your roommate—or have her come along."

Shirley sat down because there was really nothing else she could do. Rick said to the waiter, "Coffee and toast and fruit—melon, or something of the sort."

Shirley said with a brief spurt of annoyance, "I couldn't possibly be permitted to choose my own breakfast?"

Rick looked at her, unsmiling. "Breakfast isn't important. You and I have a lot to talk over, and the quickest way to get rid of him was tell him what we wanted. Now, then—"

Shirley studied him, and now there was genuine anger in her heart that fought down the lonely cry of hunger that had dwelt there since first she had set eyes on him.

"Look, Rick, let's not start fighting all over again," she said swiftly and quietly. "I know exactly what you think of me—"

"Do you?" he broke in, and added, "I wonder!"

Shirley blinked. "Well, if I don't, it certainly isn't because you've failed to tell me—over and over and over again!" she reminded him swiftly.

His brown, strong-looking hands were folded on the crisp white cloth, and he was looking down at them, a little furrow drawing his thick dark brows together.

"I've been doing a heck of a lot of thinking lately, Angel," he admitted and added with an attempt at humor that was a bit wry, "and for a guy like me, that's hard and serious business. Somehow, I can't get over seeing you wearing the insignia of an Air Evacuation nurse. It doesn't fit in with the picture I had of you. And the job you're doing—I don't know—you're not a bit like the girl I knew at Palm Beach."

Through her hurt and anger she lashed out at him sharply, "The girl you knew at Palm Beach? That's rather an overstatement, isn't it? You never took the trouble to know me at all. You simply looked, decided I was no good, that I was everything you didn't like in every woman you'd ever known—and let it go at that."

Rick said grimly, his eyes dark and unhappy, "I took one good, long look at you, there in Palm Beach, and knew that if I wasn't one very cagey guy, I'd wake up some morning and discover that you were—all the women I'd ever wanted in my life, rolled into one. And I took darned good pains to keep as far away from you as possible. Which, obviously, wasn't far enough, come to think of it!"

She was very still for a moment, incredulous. Could he mean—? Oh, but that was too fantastic! The small, frail flower of hope that had dared lift its tiny head once or twice in her heart must not be allowed to do so again; killing it hurt too badly, and took too long.

She drew a deep breath and said quietly, "Let's—just skip it, shall we? And go on being enemies?"

"I won't skip it, damn it!" said Rick savagely, though he kept his tone low so that it did not reach beyond their table. "I was never your enemy, though the Lord knows I tried like the devil to hate and despise you, that night when Katrina and I stumbled on you and Jonny. I admit Jonny was my friend, but it was all I could do to keep from kicking his teeth in."

"Because you thought Katrina was hurt," she said through her teeth. "And you were in love with Katrina—"

"In love with her?" he repeated, as though not quite sure that was what she really had said. "For Pete's sake! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"But—but—if you were not in love with Katrina—" Shirley stammered after a dazed moment.

"I *liked* Katrina! I admired her! I thought she was a swell little person, and she was madly in love with Jonny and he with her, and that seemed to me a very fine thing! But I'm not in love with her and I never have been. *You* ought to know that!"

Shirley had the feeling that she made a wild clutch at her tottering senses, but the best she could come up with was a stammered, "How—how—should I know that? You—told me aboard ship you'd tried to marry her—"

"I offered what small measure of comfort I could, because she was heartbroken. I would have married her, I suppose, if she'd wanted me to, but I still say I was not, and never have been in love with her! I've been—rather busy being in love with *you.*"

Shirley gasped and clenched her hands tight in her lap. "With —with me?" she stammered.

He nodded, as though resentful of her surprise. "I was in love with you from the first."

They were no longer in a hotel dining room. They were far away from the rest of the world, in some secret, lovely forest glade, and there were birds singing, and the sun was shining with a brightness never seen before, and a soft spring wind murmured through tall pines. And she told herself she couldn't possibly have heard him say that! Not that he loved her—and then her heart caught on a small, jagged sob, and her dazed mind repeated, *"Was,* you fool! *Was."* He said he *was* in love with you—not that he *is!"*

"That was why it hit me so hard when I saw you making a play for Jonny," he said grimly.

Sharp anger burned through her.

"Once and for all, for the record, let's get this straight," she said. "I was *not* making a play for Jonny! That little scene in the patio didn't mean one single thing except that Jonny'd had a cocktail too many—"

"But you let Katrina think it meant something—"

And suddenly, before she could stop them, she heard words spilling from her lips that she had never, never meant to say;

words he would not believe and that would only make him despise her the more, but words that she could not stop, no matter how hard she tried.

"Katrina had been wanting to break her engagement to Jonny, because she thought she liked you better. She'd been hunting and hunting for some excuse that wouldn't discredit her in your eyes. And so when she saw Jonny and me going out into the garden, and she knew he had had too much to drink, she looked upon it as a heavensent opportunity. She had you with her, so it was the easiest thing in the world for her to be sure that you would see, if there was anything to be seen. She was tickled to death when the moonlight and the liquor all combined to make Jonny do a silly thing and, because he was happy, kiss the nearest girl."

"It's pretty rotten to attack Katrina like that—" Rick began sternly, though there was suddenly a worried, uncertain look in his eyes.

"She didn't hesitate to attack me. She even offered to pay me for helping her to break her engagement in such a way that you wouldn't feel she was to blame," Shirley told him hotly.

She thrust back her chair, but before she rose, she said quietly, "If Katrina had sincerely loved Jonny, do you honestly believe that she would have condemned him without a word, or a chance to explain? When you and I both know how unimportant a casual kiss is among her friends? Didn't it ever occur to you that a girl really and truly in love with the man she wants to marry would be only too anxious to believe anything he tried to tell her, instead of jumping to the worst possible conclusion and breaking off the engagement in a fine rage?"

Rick was listening to her, frowning, beginning to believe her in spite of his preconceived notions.

Shirley's voice was soft and warm and not quite steady when she finished. "Do you think, for one single moment, that if I were in love with you and came upon a scene like that, I would not listen to your explanation? Any girl *honestly* in love would listen!"

He had been staring at her. Now there was a sudden gleam in his eyes, and his voice was low and not too steady as he asked swiftly, "Angel, does that mean—"

"It means that Katrina wasn't really in love with Jonny in the first place, or she wouldn't have broken her engagement so

lightly," she said, steadying her voice with an effort, meeting his eyes squarely. "And—that's *all* I meant."

And without giving him a chance to answer, Shirley turned and walked steadily and swiftly out of the room and to the street. She walked blindly, not conscious of the sunny, wind-swept day, not conscious of the people into whom she bumped, murmuring an absent-minded apology. There was, for one crazy moment, the hope that he might follow her; but she knew that if he did, she would not be able to keep back her tears. And it would be a shameful and humiliating thing to break down before him. She needed all her strength to put him out of her mind and out of her heart, which she must do if she was to go on with her job. And of course she must go on with her job; it was an important job, more important than any personal feeling, more important than any dearly bought dream of happiness. She had no right, she told herself fiercely, even to think of her own happiness or hopes or dreams, until her job had been finished, until there was no longer any need for that job!

She did not see Rick again during her leave. Whether he was avoiding her, or he had been sent away, she could not tell. She dared not ask. Because she was much too busy telling herself that anything that had ever existed between them—and it had existed only on her part—was over and done with. It was idiotic to fall asleep at night remembering the tone of his voice when he had said, almost reluctantly, "I've been rather busy being in love with you!"

Always hard on the heels of that memory she made herself remember that he had said "I *was* in love with you," with a finality that told her more bitterly than mere words could ever do, that the emphasis was on that little word "was." He *had* been in love with her. But even that was not very comforting; because she was deeply, unalterably convinced that when you really love a person, you were always overanxious to give that person the benefit of any possible doubt. If Rick's love for her had been deep-rooted, he would have waited for her explanation that night; he would have been anxious to believe that Jonny's kiss had been casual and light. A man in love will hope until the last, and take every means of bolstering that hope.

She decided, in the slow, painful process of such thought as she could spare for her problem, that even though Rick might have fancied himself in love with her, it was not the enduring, unquestioning love on which a happy marriage could be based.

And she would much rather never see him again than to take the kind of love that he had once felt for her.

And so she did all the things that the other girls did, laughed and played and relaxed and slept late in the mornings, and got to bed early at night. When the leave was ended, she climbed aboard the big cargo plane with a feeling of "going home."

There was a flurry of greetings back at the base. The girls who were going out on leave demanded to know what "must" be seen in the New Zealand city to the south; Shirley and Ginny and the others recounted their own experiences and gave advice. Then they were posted for work; the routine caught them up and after a few days it was, to Shirley, as though that little interlude in New Zealand had never been. Except that she could feel a warm, comforting glow at the memory of Jonny Derwent's newfound happiness; and that no matter where she might go or what she might do, she knew she could never tear the image of Rick Chambers out of her heart.

She and the others in her squadron called it "routine." But there were never two flights exactly alike. In after years, they would look back and there would be something in each flight that would make it stand out clear-cut and apart from all other flights.

There was, for instance, the time when Shirley stood beside the litter on which lay the handsome, red-headed boy with the glazed, tragic blue eyes. He had lost an arm. When she had tried to soothe him into sleep, and had been about to administer a sedative, he had smiled at her and said brusquely, "It's no use, Lieutenant—just a waste of good dope! That stuff acts in reverse on me—just makes me more wakeful. I'm—I guess you call it allergic to that kind of stuff. Sleeping tablets wake me up, and ordinarily hot coffee puts me to sleep; but I don't think I care much about sleeping right now. I've got an awful lot of things to do an awful lot of thinking about."

Shirley said quietly, touching with her fingertips the place where an arm should have been, "This, for instance?"

The boy's face twisted, but he answered frankly, "That and other things. What am I going to do now?"

"You'll be hospitalized until you learn to use a new arm, and then you'll be discharged and given a chance to go back to civilian life—and your old job maybe," said Shirley gently.

His eyes were bleak and bitter. His lone hand clenched into a

hard, taut fist, and she saw the little muscle in his jaw quiver beneath the force of his effort at composure.

"Yeah? Excuse me, Lieutenant, but that's funny! Funny as hell! Know what my civilian job was?" For a moment Shirley saw panic in his eyes, fear of the future that not even the most violent Japanese attack had been able to bring there.

"What was it, soldier?" she asked softly.

"A circus acrobat," he told her and his mouth twisted in what tried very hard to be a grin. "Can you imagine a circus acrobat with only one arm?"

"Perhaps not," she told him gravely. "But there are other jobs—"

"Not for me, Lieutenant," he cut in almost savagely. "I'm the fourth generation of circus acrobats in my family. It's all I've ever known, or wanted to know. I'm *good*—or—I *was!*"

Shirley was, for one of the many countless times in her day, deeply thankful for the rigid training in self-discipline that she had had throughout her nursing career. For one pitying tone in her voice, one intimation of the tears that dripped in her heart, wanting to cry out in helpless fury against the bitter, wicked waste of such men as these—and the effect on him would be terrible to contemplate. What he needed was calmness, a bracing tone that would help him to pull himself together.

"I'll bet you were," she told him cheerfully. "And that's why you can be good at something else. And besides, the circus has changed. Maybe you wouldn't like it now."

He thought that over for a moment and then he nodded thoughtfully and said reluctantly, "Maybe you're right at that. It's hard to believe it—but a circus going out under canvas, as it did in the old days, and the way they go out now, with all the fire precautions they have to take—"

He was silent for a moment and Shirley waited, knowing that it was good for him to be able to unburden his tortured mind like this, and that it wasn't at all important that she should agree or disagree with him; the important thing was for him to go on talking until he was more nearly at peace.

Once more he was still, thinking. Then suddenly he looked up at her and his grin made his lean, haggard face look almost boyish and gay.

"You like elephants, Lieutenant?" he demanded eagerly.

Shirley laughed. "Well, I really wouldn't know. I've never met any," she told him gaily.

"No, of course not," he agreed and his grin deepened. "Well, I've always been crazy about 'em. Elephants are more fun than anything else in a circus. They work harder than anybody else on the lot, pulling and shoving and heaving the big trucks and the circus wagons. They got a right to stand and eat hay and the peanuts the kids feed 'em after the show gets started! The things those babies can think of!"

Sergeant Summerlin was moving quietly about the plane, and Shirley knew that if she were needed by any of the other patients, he would summon her. And she knew, too, that this red-headed, blue-eyed boy who was emptying out the pockets of his tortured mind was relieving a tension that no medicine could have reached. And so she waited beside him, smiling, interested, friendly.

"I remember once when we were on the road," he went on, and now by the tone of his voice she knew that he was scarcely conscious of her any more except as a willing listener. "There was a train wreck and some of the cars were derailed. One of the elephants—a young bull named Elmer—was pinned in the wreckage and there was so much screaming and confusion that nobody was doing anything about it. The leader of our herd was Old Mom, and she sure made the rest of 'em stand around. Well, when they heard Elmer screaming for help, they all threw up their trunks and let out a yell—and lady, when you hear sixteen of 'em all bellering it at once, it makes your hair stand up! Well, they all piled down to the road where Elmer was pinned under the wrecked car and they went to work like beavers, lifting those big timbers off of him, until he was free. Then Old Mom got him on his feet and the others crowded around him and they felt him all over to be sure he wasn't hurt. And then all of a sudden it seemed to dawn on them that there'd been a wreck and they were all entitled to a brief spell of going nuts! So they all trumpeted like mad and began to stampede! It took us two days to round 'em up—and when we did find 'em they were all in the river, splashing and playing like a gang of kids! They go crazy about water, you know. If one of 'em is loose and even *smells* anything bigger than a mud puddle, that's where you'll find 'em! But we rounded these guys up, and Old Mom led the way right back to the circus and went to work!"

Shirley was genuinely interested now, which was the best tonic the boy could have had.

"Didn't they do any damage?" she asked.

"Oh, they scared some people half to death, and they trampled down some crops and stuff, but the claim agent with the company went around squaring things and the circus did a turnaway business at our next stand."

Shirley said lightly, "It was lucky that none of the other animals escaped—the lions or tigers—"

The boy's face tightened a little and she was afraid that she had said the wrong thing. He was silent for a moment and then he said quietly, "One of 'em did—a young Bengal tiger. But the girl who worked the cat act got him. She was quite a gal! She'd raised that tiger from a kitten, and when his cage was smashed and he escaped, scared half to death, orders went out to round him up and shoot him. But late that night, word came that they'd got him hemmed in a sort of cave out in the hills. Alice went with 'em, and believe it or not, she walked right up to the mouth of the cave, and called him, and pretty soon he came slipping out. He came out to her like a half-grown kitten and stepped right into his cage, and looked like he was tickled to death to get there."

Shirley said, her eyes on his face, "Alice sounds like quite a girl."

"She's tops," said the boy simply.

"And you're worrying for fear she may not like you so well now." Shirley's gentle voice probed the deepest part of his mental wound, letting in the healing light of reason to the darkness and pain of his secret fear.

The boy's hand clenched hard and she saw that his forehead was damp with sweat, his eyes tortured.

"Oh, Alice will be—swell," he said thickly. "She loves me, and I'm not afraid that this will stop her loving me, any more than it would stop me loving her. But how the devil can I make a living for her, take care of her, with only one wing?"

"Well, I think maybe that's something you ought to leave to your Uncle Sam, son," said Shirley gently. "After all, he's deeply grateful for what you boys have done for him, and you needn't be afraid that he'll let you down. All you have to do is get well, and leave the rest of it to him! You can have a little business of your own, and he'll see to it that you have all the help you need. You and Alice needn't worry in the least."

He looked up at her, frowning, anxious to believe her. "That's straight goods, Lieutenant? We've heard a lot of stuff, of

course, but a fellow doesn't have much time up front to think about anything except seeing that he don't get hit before he knocks off a few of these slant-eyed babies!"

"It's straight goods, soldier," Shirley assured him firmly, "and you can bank on it. Back at the hospital where you're going there'll be somebody who can answer every question you want to ask, and give you straight goods on all of it. Maybe you aren't going to be a circus acrobat again—but I'll bet you anything that you and Alice are going to be able to marry, and have a nice little business of your own."

"Sa-a-y, I just thought of something," said the boy eagerly. "Alice has three or four cats that belong to her personally. I remember once seeing a service station with a tourist camp and a sort of zoo attached—I'll bet you Alice and me could open up a place like that and maybe make ourselves a nice piece of jack. Maybe down in Florida some place. Gee whiz, Lieutenant, wouldn't that be *something?*"

"And as easy as pie, too—you wait and see," Shirley assured him warmly.

"I'll have the pay I've sent home for bonds, and I'll have my discharge pay, and maybe I could borrow a few bucks from that Uncle Sammy you're talking about." The boy's eyes were shining and there was color in his cheeks.

Shirley had given him hope for despair, dreams for bitterness; and she knew that there could have been no medicine better calculated to bring him to a complete recovery. The thought gave her a deep happiness. It was one of the many things that made her glad that she was a nurse and proud of the uniform she wore. The first few hours after being wounded, when the shock and the bewilderment began to wear off, and a numbing realization of what had happened to them began to sweep over her patients, were the crucial hours, and she felt it a privilege when she could help a boy to overcome that shock and first hour of horror and panic.

No, no flight was every really "routine."

15

One evening, on her off-day, when she had finished chow, Shirley decided that she would like to be alone and went for a

walk down the beach. Behind her, the sounds and the sight of the base dropped away; she rounded a curve in the beach and before her there was a loneliness that seemed to be a million miles removed from even such outward semblance of civilization as the base had tried to superimpose on this jungle island.

She walked on as the sun dropped out of sight and the short, swift twilight settled down, until she came to a big palm log half embedded in the sand, and dropped down on it to rest.

She was wrapped in her thoughts and did not realize that she had stayed there so long, until suddenly, almost with the effect of a well-managed stage scene, the great yellow moon popped above the horizon, and a moment later, a long, tremulous path of silver lay across the waters, until it was as though one could walk out on that path and straight into the moon itself.

The night was still and peaceful, the moonlight unutterably lovely. And yet, as it always would, the silvery-white flood of tropic moonlight brought back a disquieting reminder of that night in the garden in Palm Beach.

She shook her shoulders as though to rid her mind of that memory. It was then that she saw the man who stood just beyond her on the beach, and for just a moment, fear touched her with its chill fingers. She remembered that she was some distance from the base, completely alone here in this wild, lonely spot. And then the man moved, and a small white pencil of light from a pocket-flash touched his face, a face that seemed to spring out at her with startling clarity, so that her heart did its little familiar jumping exercise. For the man was Rick!

"Hello," he greeted her with an attempt at lightness. "I hope I didn't scare you! I've been watching you. I didn't want to just barge in and yell at you. You looked so remote, somehow, I was afraid to disturb you! But I'm supposed to warn you that you are out of bounds—too far from the base for it to be entirely safe, especially at night."

He went on talking as though deliberately to give her a chance to pull herself together. But when she spoke, it was to say inanely, breathlessly, "Where—where in the world did you come from?"

He smiled. "I've been busy as a little bee among the flowers, of late, piloting a bunch of 'big shots' from back home on a sightseeing tour! Seems they had a lot of curiosity about what

was happening over here, and they saw enough to widen their eyes, I promise you!" He smiled, yet with a little anxious look in his eyes. Or could it have been a trick of the moonlight? She couldn't quite be sure.

"How have you been?" he asked, sitting on the log beside her. There was a tone in his voice that brought the color to her cheeks.

"Splendid, thanks. Are you all right?" she asked, flushing with confusion at the utter banality of that.

He grinned at her, teasingly, though that anxious look still stayed in his eyes. "Oh, perfectly fine, thank you. You all right?" He chattered in the tone of a social parrot, and then he made a little gesture of dismissal and said, his tone entirely grave, "Look, Angel, how about laying aside all the small talk and having things out, so we'll both know where we are?"

Shirley said swiftly, *"Please!* Let's not fight any more." She caught her breath, hating herself for the little shaken plea that was so revealing.

Rick said soberly, "I guess I've got that coming to me, but it hurts, just the same as if I didn't deserve it. The fact that every time I want to talk to you, you are quite sure we are going to fight!"

"I'm—sorry," she stammered. "Only—from the very first, we have fought so much—"

"I take a little comfort from that thought," said Rick unexpectedly. "We couldn't fight so furiously unless we meant a lot to each other, could we?"

"That sounds a bit crazy," she murmured.

"Oh, I suppose so. Humans are crazy people, most of them," he admitted largely and went on quickly, "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately. I told you that morning in town—remember? —that thinking, heavy serious thinking for anyone like me, was hard work not to be undertaken too lightly! Well, that's still true—maybe truer now than ever. For I've never had anything to think about that was as important as this."

She was very still, grateful that she could sit on the palm log, for she knew quite well that she could never have stood on her feet, with her knees feeling like wet tissue paper and her heart pounding so hard that surely he must hear it and wonder at its clamor.

"What you said that morning—made sense," he went on after a little, trying to get his thoughts in order so that he could put

them into words that would make her understand them as he did. "About Katrina and Jonny. It took me quite a bit to see it; but once I began to get a glimmer of light, it became clear as noonday."

"You mean—" She could not go on.

"I mean when you said that if Katrina had been *really* in love with Jonny, she wouldn't have broken her engagement to him for nothing more important than a hasty kiss, snatched in a moonlit garden. The more I thought about that, the more sense it made. I realized that if I had been engaged to you, and I'd discovered you with Jonny in the moonlight, I'd have been as mad as hell and I'd probably have tried to mop up the patio with Jonny. But I wouldn't have used that as a pretext to break my engagement to you. I'd have realized that I was the luckiest guy in the world to be engaged to you in the first place, and you'd have had to look me square in the eye and say, 'Look, Rick—sorry, but that's how it is. I don't love you and I *do* love Jonny, so what say we call it quits?"

I'd never have said that—not to you, darling! the words rose straight from her heart, but she managed to keep them unspoken, as she waited, scarcely daring to breathe.

"That night," Rick went on, frowning in his effort to make himself quite clear, "when Katrina and I stepped in on your scene with Jonny, I had been fighting against the thought that I was falling in love with you. I didn't want to be in love with you, with any woman for that matter. Being emotionally entangled, with a war blowing up right in your face— Well, I'd seen some of the fellows at the base who were in love, some of them recently married, some of them wanting to be married—all of 'em, it seemed to me, suffering the tortures of the damned. I had told myself over and over, 'That's not for you, Chambers, me lad! You're much better off as you are! That was the way I felt that day when I met you for the first time, and you kept trying to get into my heart and my bloodstream. And that night I saw Jonny kiss you, I said to myself, 'There! You see? Now if you were in love with her, think how much worse you'd be feeling.' I decided I hated you for stealing Katrina's man. I think if I hadn't been quite so busy hating you, like the fool I was, I'd have wondered a little that Katrina should be so relieved to rid herself of Jonny."

He peered at her anxiously through the silver-white moonlight. "Beginning to see what I mean?"

She controlled her voice with difficulty. She was very careful to sit with her head turned so that the moonlight could not find her face, and all she trusted herself to say was a faint, "I'm—not sure."

He made a little gesture of hopelessness.

"I suppose I'm not very clear," he admitted. "It took me a dickens of a long time to understand myself. It took what you said that morning at breakfast to sort of give me the key. I saw that you were right, that Katrina's being so willing to believe the worst of Jonny, instead of fighting like the dickens to believe that he was in the right, proved that she didn't really love him."

Shirley drew a deep, hard breath. "I'm glad that you do understand that much."

"Oh, I'm a very smart guy," he admitted dryly. "Any time a ton of bricks falls on me, I can begin to grasp certain facts. But old Featherfoot was still in the dark when he saw you on the boat. He said, 'This is it! She's the one! But you had your chance and lost it and you're a double-starred, copper-riveted, brass-bound thus-and-so if you think she's going to give you another chance.' And I tried like hell to convince myself that I hadn't even wanted the *first* chance! Though of course Featherfoot and I both knew what a liar I was."

He was silent for a moment, rubbing his hand across his forehead with a little unconscious gesture that made him look oddly young and bewildered.

"I don't know whether this will make things any clearer or not," he went on presently. "But even then I was still fighting against you, against loving you, trying to tell myself that I could still escape you. Because, you see, I was still scared to death of an emotional entanglement! I guess I haven't much confidence in the good old institution of matrimony, after all. I've seen people who were so madly in love they couldn't tell whether they were going or coming—until after they'd been married a few months and they got bored and there was Reno, or Mexico. I didn't feel that a few months of heaven was worth the long, long years of hell—just in case you happened to be fooled about the other party to the marriage contract."

Once more his voice broke off, and he was silent, watching her. But Shirley still sat so that the silvery white moonlight could not find her face, for she could not yet endure his eyes upon her. She knew that if he looked into her eyes now he must know the truth; and she wasn't ready yet for him to look into her heart.

After a little he went on, his voice slow, difficult, as though words with which to clothe his thoughts came almost painfully.

"And then that night up the line in that foxhole with the Japs unloading assorted hell all around us—I knew then that I'd trade my immortal soul for a month, or even a week of heaven with you. Only unless you loved me, too, I knew it couldn't be any part of heaven. I knew then that I loved you, that I'd loved you for a hell of a long time and I'd go right on loving you until the end of the chapter. But I knew that you couldn't possibly forgive the kind of fool I'd been and that there wasn't any hope—"

She made a little startled movement, swiftly controlled, silenced a soft murmur by setting her teeth hard in her lower lip.

He was still, watching her, waiting for her to speak. And when she did not, he said suddenly, "For the Lord's sake, Shirley, haven't you anything at all to say to me? I've been trying so hard to make you understand—" He bit down on the word and after a moment he spoke again, quietly, evenly, "Well, there you have it—my pride, all nicely torn into little ribbons, and done up neatly and offered to you. Take it or leave it."

She raised her head, the moonlight picking out the golden threads in her hair, and let him see her face. Rick was very still for a moment, as though afraid to believe what the brilliant moonlight showed him.

"Darling," he said and his voice was an unsteady whisper, touched with fear, threaded with wonder, "*Darling*—why, you're crying!"

"Of course," she told him unsteadily. "I've done an awful lot of—c-c-crying since I first met you, Rick Chambers!"

Rick sat almost rigid and his hands were clenched in the pockets of his tunic.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said at last. "I wouldn't have hurt you—"

"But you have, Rick! You have—over and over again, until now— Oh, Rick, I can't bear it if you're not—*sure!*" she cried and hid her face in her hands.

He drew a long breath to steady his voice before he could ask huskily, "Sure of what, darling?"

"Sure that you really love me, what else?" she whispered. Now all her defenses were down. She stood up before him and her face was lifted, the white moonlight laying gentle fingers

on it, so that now he could read its expression with a clarity that made his being sting with startled rapture.

"I was never so sure of anything in all my life," he told her. His voice was deep-toned, steady, vibrant with an emotion that set her heart singing.

There was a breathless instant, and then he rose and said sharply, "Shirley—does that mean— Oh, my good Lord—do you—"

And now, despite the tears that still brimmed her eyes, she was laughing at him, a small, smothered, breathless laugh. "Oh, you fool!" she said very low. "You darling *fool!*"

"I'm a fool, of course. I've always been," he said uneasily.

"Don't—talk so much!" said Shirley and walked straight into his arms.

His arms went about her, slowly, as though afraid that the miracle had come to pass; but the feel of her there, warm and sweet and vibrant against his heart, wiped out that small, terrible fear that this was, after all, only a particularly vivid dream, and he knew that she was really there, close-held in his arms, lifting her face for his kiss, her mouth tremulous, soft, faintly salt with her tears.

"Oh, my good Lord!" said Rick huskily, in a tone of awe and wonder and reverence as he bent his head and set his mouth on hers.

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It was all settled before they said good night. They were going to be married immediately. The chaplain at the base would perform the ceremony, and when Shirley's next ten-day leave came up, Rick would try to wangle a few days so they could have a honeymoon in New Zealand. But whether there was a honeymoon or not, they would be married, and there would be no more fear of separation. No matter what happened, they would belong to each other. And they talked, as lovers will, wistfully of the past when they might have known the glory of love fulfilled, but were so busy fighting each other and the terrific emotion each felt for the other—

She hoped, of course, that she would once more be assigned to his ship for her "routine" trip up the line. But it did not

happen. All the plans had been made for their wedding on Friday. Shirley would return to the base Thursday evening, and would be off duty for forty-eight hours; and Rick felt sure he could manage it so that he, too, would have some part of those forty-eight hours off.

Shirley was popular with the others in her squadron, as well as with the entire personnel of the base with whom she had come in contact during the months of her service here. And the truest of the old adages—that all the world loves a lover—was exemplified in the excitement that swept the base at the news of the wedding which was being planned. Rick, too, was popular, and to hearts that were sick of the beastliness and the horror of war, the thought of two people gloriously in love and about to join their lives together was something very beautiful.

There was a pooling of sugar rations for a cake, a cake baked with passionate attention and devotion, by the head baker, who all but had hysterics until at last the huge cake came out of the oven. It was delicately brown and gloriously appetizing of smell; the icing behaved beautifully; it was truly a cake of cakes, and much too beautiful, they all agreed, to be eaten.

Several of the pilots coming in from islands where the wreckage of war had not yet devastated orchid-wreathed jungles, brought great masses of the exquisite blossoms, so that surely not even the wealthiest girl in the world could have had a more richly adorned wedding; friendly natives from back in the hills, discovering that something was in the wind, but not quite sure what it was, but grateful for the kindly doctors and nurses, came with gifts, and a native feast was planned as a wedding reception.

Friday morning dawned gloriously bright and clear: a little brisk wind tiptoeing through the palms, a sky twice as blue as any sky had a right to be, sunshine so warm and golden that it might almost have been spread on with a brush.

The cake was a perfect thing, enthroned in the Officers' Club. The Club itself was half-smothered with orchids and trailing vines, and the whole place was early astir, with the excitement of the big day.

It was Ginny Parker's day on duty, but before she climbed into the big cargo plane that would return transformed into an ambulance, she came to Shirley and said, with her slow, lovely smile, "I knew this was going to come in handy when I bought

it, but I was never quite sure just where! Anyway, it will have to pass for a wedding present, for the time being!"

The little tissue-wrapped package she held out contained a pair of cobwebby stockings, precious and irreplaceable, a gift to be cherished. But Ginny smiled and said, "They'll look better on you than on me. You've got much prettier legs!" She hurried out, and a moment later the heavily laden plane taxied down the runway and lifted into the silken air, with Ginny waving a gay hand from the window.

There were other presents, contrived, Shirley could only guess how. A few of the patients, clever with their hands, had whiled away long, tiresome hours of convalescence by carving gifts; the other nurses each contributed some cherished small possession whose value was doubled and trebled by the knowledge, in Shirley's heart, that the gift came from some jealously hoarded treasure.

By noon they were all scanning the sky for the plane that would bring Rick back from duty south; but it was almost three o'clock before the great plane winged into sight, and they all clustered about the air strip, waiting eagerly for the first sight of him.

The big plane, pausing here only to pick up the nurse who was next to go "up the line," sat down and the door swung open. The pilot, a fresh-faced boy, slid out of the ship, but there was no sign of Rick.

"Where's Lieutenant Andrews?" demanded the pilot swiftly. "I have to see her."

While the plane was being checked, and while the flight nurse and her medical corpsmen rechecked their own supplies and equipment, the young pilot stood before Shirley, extending a letter and a tiny package that he had brought out from the pocket of his jacket.

"Lieutenant Chambers asked me to give you this, Lieutenant Andrews," said the pilot gravely. "He's—been ordered home."

Shirley caught her breath and her hands clenched until the letter crackled warningly in her hands. She could not speak. Her eyes filled with quick tears, to her anger and helplessness. She resented those tears as a mark of weakness in a nurse; but in that moment she was first a woman, and then a nurse.

"T-t-thank you," she said after a moment, and the young pilot said quietly, "Sorry, Lieutenant, but—*c'est la guerre*—or have you already heard that?"

Shirley managed what tried desperately to be a smile, and said huskily, "Yes, I've heard rumors that there's a war going on!"

The pilot's smile applauded her valiant effort at composure, but his tone was sober.

"Well, you can take it from me, Lieutenant, the rumor is well founded," he assured her, and saluting smartly, he turned back to the waiting plane.

The group that had gathered to welcome Rick looked uneasily at Shirley, but after a moment, she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin, and faced them all.

"Sorry, people," she told them, trying desperately to keep her husky tone light and gay, "it seems there isn't going to be any wedding, after all."

There was a little shocked, protesting murmur, and then somebody swore lustily and savagely and with a picturesqueness that bespoke many years in the regular Army. It was, in fact, the head baker, who had wheedled and coaxed and bribed and "shot craps" for the extra sugar rations that had gone into the baking of that truly noble cake! And nobody had the heart to silence him.

"Sorry, Tex." Shirley laid her hand lightly on his arm for a moment. "It's a beautiful cake, and Rick would have loved it. But it seems he had to see some people about a war—"

Tex mopped his red, perspiring face, pulled himself together, and looked down at her, a little abashed that he had so far forgotten himself.

"Okay, Lieutenant," he said grimly after a minute. "If you can take it, I guess I can!"

Shirley made herself laugh a little; but it was a taut, almost hysterical laugh and she said huskily, "I can't take it, Tex, but what the heck are we going to do about it?"

Tex grinned wryly. "Take it and like it, I reckon."

She shook her bright head and set her teeth, because a tear spilled out of her eyes, but she said sturdily, "No, Tex, we've got to *take* it, but we don't have to *like* it! And that's what we'll do!"

Tex grinned, saluted, and said, "You're okay, Lieutenant. Any time you want me to bake you another wedding cake, just say the word."

The others melted away, murmuring such comfort as they could offer, and abashed because there was really no comfort in words, after all.

Shirley walked down the beach, the unopened letter and the unopened package in her hand. She walked until she reached the half-submerged palm log where she had sat that night a week ago, when she had looked up and seen Rick coming towards her.

She sat down, drew a deep, hard breath, and with hands that were steady now, she broke the seal of the letter and drew it out of its envelope. It was written hurriedly, the first letter she had ever had from him, and it said:

Dearest:

Word has just this moment come through— I'm ordered to report to Washington for reassignment and as quickly as I can make it. There's a ship about to take off and there's room for me, so what else can I do? I'd probably desert, if it would do any good. There aren't any words to tell you how I feel about pulling out right now. If I could only wait twenty-four hours—but of course, that's out.

Oh, Lord, darling, why can't people and nations live at peace with each other, without all this hell-raising of war that upsets everybody's lives? Anyway, I'm sending you a package. I wanted terribly to put it on your finger myself, but anyway, I'll like knowing you are wearing it. And I'm taking the mate to it along with me in the hope that some day before we are both old and gray, I'll be able to slip it on your finger.

I've got to go now, darling. Dearest, I love you—I'll always love you.

Yours always,

Rick.

She felt that she had not read a letter, but that she had heard Rick's voice in her ears, saying the things he had written, fighting against the recall, knowing he could do nothing but obey it, not really willing to do anything else, since he was a soldier and his country's needs must come ahead of any personal hopes or desires.

After a long, long time she opened the small package. A ring looked up at her, a ring of old yellow gold, holding in its old-

fashioned mounting a square-cut emerald, not large but of a great brilliancy and fire. It was surrounded by the frost-like glimmer of small diamonds. As surely as though he had told her, she knew that this ring had been his mother's. Nothing could have made her feel closer to Rick, more as though she had known him for years, than this beautiful ring that must have meant a great many small and large sacrifices on the part of his parents; it must have meant a great deal to Rick himself that he had carried it with him, even into war, a sort of talisman—his mother's ring! She lifted it to her cheek and touched it with her lips before she slipped it on her finger.

And so she went back to the job, never letting it become "routine," facing each task as though it were the first of its kind. Her interest, her devotion never flagged. Gradually, as the weeks slid by, Rick's letters began to reach her; he was assigned to a base in the States, undergoing special training. He couldn't tell her anything much about it, but the thing she wanted most to hear, and that she would never tire of hearing was the thing he could and did tell her, over and over again—"I love you—I'll always love you."

It came to her almost as a shock when she realized that her first year of service was over and she was due for a leave back home. She had received permission to fly back with an ambulance plane loaded with sick and wounded who would be handled by hospitals in the States and, when they were able, discharged into civilian life again. They would not be returned to the battle zone because they were all amputées—a leg or an arm, in some cases both legs, had been left back there on one of those little islands that had seemed romantic and glamorous when they had seen them as a background for Dorothy Lamour in a sarong, and perhaps Bing Crosby's good-humored baritone singing to the music of steel guitars.

The flight was without event. The men were keyed up, expectant of the first sight of home in two years or more. There was little she could do for them, but her heart ached as she saw their tension mount with every hour of the flight that brought them nearer and nearer home.

Her job was over when the last patient had been removed from the plane, put deftly and gently into an ambulance and trundled away to the huge hospital that was like a city of white-walled buildings, surrounded by glowing flower beds and green trees just breaking into the first spring leaf.

Her blood thinned by a year in the tropics, she found the brisk wind too cool for comfort. She shivered a little in her gabardine slacks and the battle jacket slung over her shoulders as she came out of the administration building where she had filed her report, and checked out for her leave after promising a superintendent of nurses that she would come back and "give a little talk" to some of the military Nurse's Aides on duty here.

She stood on the administration steps for a moment, looking about her, sniffing the chill wind, glorying in the sight of well-dressed people going to and fro about the grounds. Cars flashed along the road in front of the hospital, and trucks rumbled; groups of convalescent patients with town leave waited for a bus. Across the road the barbed-wire fence enclosed groups of cream-colored buildings, surrounded by green lawns and beds where daffodils and tulips fluttered in the wind, buildings that someone had told her housed prisoners of war who had been wounded in Italy and Africa—and such a gust of anger and hatred shook her as to make her, after a moment, ashamed.

She drew a long breath and shifted her bag to her other hand. She was free for a while; she would go in town to a hotel, and then she'd put in a long distance call for Rick at his base. He should be coming in from the field in another hour or so. She stood perfectly still, staring straight ahead of her, quite sure that she was the victim of an hallucination. Because it couldn't possibly be within the bounds of reason that this was Rick coming towards her, walking at first very fast, and then at the sight of her there, in her slacks and battle jacket and overseas cap, breaking into a run. Even as her knees grew weak and she felt a dizziness threatening her, Rick had reached her and swept her into his arms. She clung to him, knowing that but for his arms about her, she must surely have collapsed.

It was Rick! Rick was here! Rick was here!

"Here," said Rick with tender severity, his voice unsteady, "stop that crying—unless you want me to burst into tears, too. The way I feel it wouldn't take more than a minute to have me howling like a prairie wolf!"

"Oh, Rick, Rick—it's really you! It's *you!* I can't believe it! I was just thinking I'd go call you over long distance and maybe I could come out to the base and see you—" Her voice broke on a sob and she crept closer in his arms and kissed him again. "Rick, how did you ever manage to be here—right now?"

"I knew your leave was nearly due, and I've been wangling

like the dickens to finish my course so that my leave would match up with yours, and though it nearly killed me, cramming as much as I had to in my thick head—I made it! I have my little spies, you know, here and there that keep me posted. I found you were due here today, and I thumbed a ride with a pal of mine—and here I am! And I've got fifteen whole days' leave. Could you make a suggestion as to what we might do with them?"

She laughed up at him radiantly. "Well, there was a bit of unfinished business out in the Pacific—maybe you recall? Of course we haven't any orchids or any wedding cake, but they're not really essential, are they? I mean you *could* manage to get along without them, if you tried very hard?"

"I could—if you were there!" he told her, and his eyes adored her. "There's only one thing that's really essential to a happy marriage, from my angle—and that's you! And you're here and I'm here and we've got fifteen days!"

Shirley's heart caught on a little jagged pain.

"Fifteen days? And after that—?" She could not keep back the words.

Rick said gravely, "You know I can't tell you that, darling—even if I knew. But I hope whatever it is includes a crack at Tokyo. That's what I've been cramming for—and I think it will!"

She nodded and drew a deep, hard breath. And then from the very depths of her heart, where lay her uttermost resources of courage and strength for the happiness of her beloved, she brought up a small but valiant smile and pinned it to her soft mouth; she could not control the pallor of her face beneath its warm, honey-golden tropic tan, but she could give him that smile and make her voice very steady as she said gravely, "Well, then, if we've only got fifteen days, we'll have to hurry. We've got a wedding to attend to!"

And Rick said very gravely, very tenderly, "I love you."

Lieut. Shirley Andrews, young Air Force Flight Nurse, tried to leave behind, with her civilian clothes, the memory of a light-hearted kiss, and with it the humiliating memory of handsome Rick Chambers, Lieutenant, USAF.

As far as Rick was concerned, Shirley was a love thief, a siren in nurse's whites who had taken advantage of a helpless patient, stolen her fiancé, and then tossed away the prize when she tired of the game.

Now, through the capriciousness of fate and the demands of war, Shirley and Rick were thrown together in an Army hospital on a Pacific island—Shirley as flight nurse on an ambulance plane and Rick as its pilot.

At first Shirley defended herself against Rick's sarcasm with a devil-may-care cloak of sophistication. But as the war progressed and each new casualty chipped away at the protective cloak, Rick began to see the kind of girl Shirley really was; he began to wonder if he had made a mistake.

On a bomb-torn tropical island, with a devastating war as a backdrop, two young and confused people slowly begin to know and understand one another, and to find what they have unconsciously wanted all along: each other.

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